"A beautiful and exciting book." David Almond, author of *Skellig*

SOPHIE ANDERSON

The House with Chicken Legs Runs Away

Illustrated by Elisa Paganelli
Cover art by Melissa Castrillón

All her life, Marinka has lived in a house with chicken legs, racing across the world on magical adventures. But one day, the house starts to act strangely…and then it runs away.

Chasing after her home, Marinka and friends travel to far-distant lands and uncover long-forgotten truths. But Marinka might have to face her worst fear – what if her house doesn't want to stop running?

The House with Chicken Legs Runs Away

SOPHIE ANDERSON

ILLUSTRATED BY ELISA PAGANELLI

USBORNE

To *Les Enfants Terribles*. Trost!

PROLOGUE

All my life, I have lived in a house with chicken legs.

The house has carried me safely through forests, up mountains and along rocky shores. It has grown vine hammocks to rock me to sleep, leafy dens for me to read in, and – when I was younger – tiny stick creatures would sometimes leap from the floorboards to join in my imaginary games.

We have played hide-and-seek among tall trees, chased each other laughing through grassy meadows and swum together in seas sparkling with glowing plankton. And we've always talked to each other, in our own way.

Usually, the house listens to me and lets me know what it is thinking and feeling through the shrug of its eaves or the tilt of its windows, the smile of its porch or the impatient twitching of its long, clawed toes.

We haven't always agreed on everything, but I have always felt loved and known that we have a special bond, because of our history and the ways our lives are entwined.

The house is a Yaga house – a place where dead souls come to celebrate their lives before being guided to the stars. I came to the house as a baby, to be guided, but I was too stubborn to pass through The Gate to the Stars. So, because I could not go back to the land of the living and would not go forward to the land of the dead, the house gave me enough energy to exist within it, on the threshold of life and death.

Baba, the Yaga who lived in the house, adopted me as her grandchild, Marinka, and I spent the first twelve years of my life as an apprentice Yaga, helping to guide the dead. We became a family: the house, Baba and me, and Jack too, of course – the jackdaw I raised from a chick.

We travelled the world together, throwing parties for the dead almost every night, and when we weren't guiding, we read books, told stories, played games…or just sat together, wrapped in the warmth of each other's company as landscapes drifted by.

When Baba passed through The Gate last year, the house did everything it could to comfort me and give me a new life that would make me happy. I didn't want to become the next Guardian of The Gate, so the house helped me find an old friend of Baba's, Yaga Tatyana. The house grew together

with Yaga Tatyana’s house – which was old and broken – so that Yaga Tatyana could live with us and take over the responsibility of guiding the dead.

Then the house even gave me enough energy to be alive, for real. It settled here, in The Land of Lakes, so that I could be near my best friend Benjamin, go to school and meet other children and do everything I ever dreamed of.

The house has always been kind, generous, playful and protective. It has always taken care of me. Until a couple of weeks ago, when it began to change…

The Bones Cause Trouble

My house has been behaving strangely lately.

It started with the glowing mushrooms. Overnight, they grew all over the floors and walls. In the morning, their caps opened and clouds of glittering spores erupted, filling the air with an acrid, choking smell. Yaga Tatyana and I wore our headscarves over our mouths while we scraped the thick stalks away.

A week later, purple vines grew from the rafters. They were stippled with tiny, green thorns and followed us around the house, curling around our limbs and pricking our skin, leaving a stinging rash like nettles do. Jack squawked at them constantly, pecked at them with his beak and flapped his wings angrily whenever they snaked close to him.

Yaga Tatyana and I dressed in several layers of clothes to protect ourselves as we cut the vines down. The house fell into a huff then. Its eaves scowled and smoke puffed grumpily from the chimney.

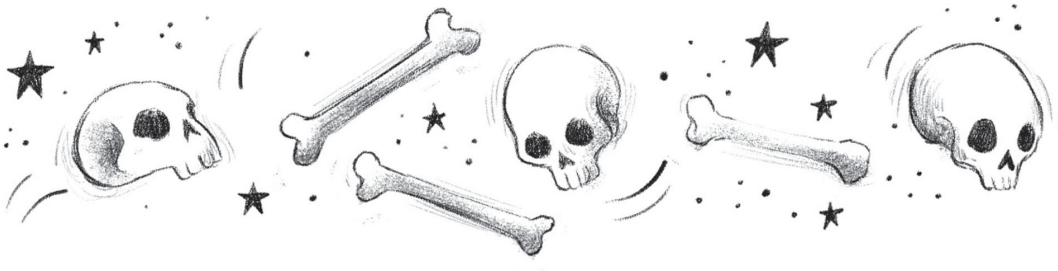
Now, it’s the fence bones causing trouble.

Since the house settled in this valley, in The Land of Lakes, the fence bones have stayed hidden in the skeleton store, which is tucked into the side of the house. Once or twice a month, the house stands up on its long, thin legs and walks to an isolated, faraway place, so that Yaga Tatyana and I can spend a night or two guiding the dead through The Gate to the Stars. At these times, the bones tumble out of the store so we can build the skull-and-bone fence that keeps out the living and guides in the dead. But as soon as we return to The Land of Lakes, where I have been trying to lead a normal life with the living, our responsibilities as Yaga become secret once more –

here, we don’t guide the dead and so the bones stay hidden. Well, they did until now.

For the last three nights, the bones have run out of the skeleton store after sunset and caused chaos. One of our neighbours was out for an evening walk, and they scared him so much that he fell into a compost heap. Thankfully, Yaga Tatyana managed to convince him that it was a freak accident involving the wind and an old model skeleton she had kept from her days as a scientist.

Then the bones danced in the field between my house and my best friend Benjamin’s house, which made Benji – the sheep I raised from a lamb – bleat so loudly with annoyance that he woke Benjamin and his father. At least they understand about the bones – Benjamin and his father are the only people in The Land of Lakes who know this is a Yaga house. They helped me chase the bones back into the skeleton store, then Benjamin’s father gave me a shiny metal padlock so that I could secure the door.



I don’t understand how the bones escaped again last night, but they did. I woke to finger bones drumming on my window and foot bones tapping on the porch steps. Yaga Tatyana somehow stayed asleep, so I crept outside to put the bones away myself.

It’s almost dawn now, and I’m exhausted from hours spent trying to drive the bones back into the store. At least they’ve stopped running away from me. The early morning air is bitterly cold though – it feels more like midwinter than the start of spring – and I shiver as I wander around the dark and frosty field, gathering the scattered, lifeless bones into my arms.

Benji the sheep watches me curiously, occasionally nudging a tibia or a fibula in my direction, and Jack flaps to and fro, gathering some of the smaller bones in his beak.

“House,” I say firmly, trying to remain calm as I carry another armful of bones towards the skeleton store. “Will you please tell me what is going on?”

But just like every other time I’ve asked the house about these strange happenings, the house ignores me. This time though, the house not only says nothing, but rises slightly and turns its back on me too.

I groan in frustration. I probably sound angry and I am a little, but more than anything I’m worried. The way the house has been behaving lately makes me feel like it is trying to push me away and I don’t understand why.

Jack caws loudly and a knuckle bone he must have been carrying in his beak thumps onto my head. “Jack!” I reach up to rub my scalp and one of Jack’s wings hits me as he rushes clumsily past. I turn to see him land heavily on Benjamin’s shoulder.

Benjamin is dressed for school, a little untidily as usual. His mousy brown hair flops over his big brown eyes, his uniform is rumpled and his trousers are slightly too short after a recent growth spurt. Although we’re the same age, Benjamin is taller than me now, and slim as a reed. His sketchbook is poking out of his pocket and there are grey smudges on his fingers, probably from sketching birds this morning over breakfast. Benjamin loves birds and drawing – his dream is to become an artist.

“Hello, Jack.” Benjamin strokes Jack’s feathers softly, then turns to me and smiles. “Hello, Marinka. The bones got out again then.”

“Yes.” I tuck some of my red curls behind my ear, realizing I probably look even more dishevelled than Benjamin. “I’m trying to gather them up before anyone sees.”

“I’ll help.” Benjamin picks up a skull rolling near his feet.

“Thanks. I don’t want you to be late for school again though.”

“You’re not coming? I hoped you might today.” Benjamin’s shoulders droop a little with disappointment. “It’s been ages since you have.”

“I know. I’m sorry. It’s just…” I crouch down to gather a jumble of ribs. “I haven’t been able to concentrate there lately. It’s probably because of everything going on with the house. I need to stay here and figure out why it’s behaving so strangely.”

“Do you have any ideas?” Benjamin asks as we walk towards the skeleton store, our arms full of bones.

I look at the house, its back turned towards me, and my throat thickens. “I’ve known the house all my life. I should be able to understand what’s going on, but the answer feels just out of reach.”

“I’m sure you’ll work it out soon,” Benjamin says gently.

“I hope you’re right.” We reach the skeleton store and push the bones inside. “I’ll have another talk with Yaga Tatyana. Maybe look for some clues in *The Book of Yaga* or *Yaga Tales* too. Do you want to come over after school and we can look together?”

“Yes, please.” Benjamin reaches up to stroke Jack again, then glances at the sky. It is paling to the blue-grey of a bullfinch egg as the sun rises behind the mountains. Benjamin sighs. “I suppose I should head off.”

Jack squawks loudly and flaps up onto the house’s roof, and I wave goodbye. “Thanks for helping with the bones.”

“See you later.” Benjamin turns and walks away, and I close the skeleton store.

Needles of rain fall, so icily cold that they sting. I pull my shawl around my chest and head towards the front door. But the house rises and turns, just faster than I am walking, so that the front door keeps getting further away from me.

I walk faster. Then, as frustration gathers inside me like a storm cloud, I break into a run. “House! Why are you doing this?” I shout.

The house turns even faster and I stop in despair. “Please, House. I’m tired and cold, and now it’s raining too!” A hot tear rolls down my cheek and the house finally halts. It lowers itself closer to the ground, then shuffles slowly back towards me.

The porch balustrade leans in my direction. It feels something like an apology, or at least an invitation. Relief flows through me as I walk up the steps to the front door. But the door is shut tight.

“House!” I push the door harder, but it doesn’t budge.

Smoke plumes from the house’s chimney.

“What is going on?” I ask for the thousandth time, not expecting the house to respond. I place my palms flat against the house’s door, close my eyes and try to feel an answer instead.

Life thrums through the wood, the familiar pulse of the house. My brow furrows. It feels different somehow. Fainter. I concentrate. The pulse is erratic and uncertain too.

“Ow!” A sharp pain darts through my fingertips. Thistle leaves are growing on the door, with long, pointed spines. I scowl at the eaves, but then my heart softens as I remember how the house’s energy felt beneath my hands.

Maybe the house isn’t trying to push me away – maybe it is trying to tell me that something is wrong. A heavy dread swells inside me with the realization. The house is struggling and it needs help.

Toads and Bees

Yaga Tatyana comes to the door and opens it easily. She looks up at the eaves and shakes her head. “House, you really should stop teasing Marinka. And, Marinka, you should have woken me to help with the bones.” Yaga Tatyana ushers me into the warmth and I collapse into my grandmother Baba’s chair near the fire.

Even after all this time, Baba’s chair still smells of her – lavender water, bread dough, *borsch* and *kvass*. I breathe in her scent and, for a moment, I feel calmer. My worries ease and the sharp edges of my feelings smooth away. But then my grief swells and my eyes sting with tears.

It’s been over a year since Baba stepped through The Gate to the Stars. I thought my grief would get easier to carry, but lately it has only become more difficult. Yaga Tatyana says grief is like a toad in your belly. She says sometimes it sleeps, curled up, deep inside. But it can wake without warning, jump into your throat and expand with a painful croak at any time.

If that’s true, then my grief toad woke sharply at the end of autumn, on my thirteenth birthday. In the morning, I went for a walk around the lake with Yaga Tatyana, Benjamin and his father, then we gathered in my house for a meal. It was lovely, but it was my first birthday without Baba and I missed her terribly. I missed her voice, her music, her dancing. Her hugs.

On all my previous birthdays, Baba always played a special song she wrote for me on her accordion. That day, I realized I would never hear it again, and I worried that the tune would fade from my memory, so I stayed up all night trying to recall every note and write it down.

Then, at the end of winter, it was the first anniversary of Baba's death. Yaga Tatyana suggested we hold a small ceremony to honour the occasion and share happy memories of her. But when evening came, all I could think was how Baba's death was my fault.

Baba stepped through The Gate to help my friend Nina reach the stars. But if I had guided Nina sooner, she wouldn't have needed help. So Baba wouldn't have gone with her and she would still be here, with me, now.

If grief is a toad in your belly, then guilt and regret are a swarm of bees in your chest. They buzz around and around, unable to escape, and they sting, sharp and painful.

The evening of the anniversary, I couldn't speak. I went to bed early and thought of everything I should have done differently in those last weeks I had with Baba, when I made so many wrong decisions that hurt Baba and the house. And I realized there was nothing I could ever do to make things right.

A sudden loud, crackling sound pulls me from my thoughts. I look up to the ceiling, where the noise is coming from, and watch in horror as part of the thick beam above me crumbles into small pieces. I shield my face with my arm and flinch as the pieces hit me. They are round and spiky, like horse-chestnut casings.

"House! What is going on now?" I climb onto Baba's chair and press my hand against the crumbling part of the beam, as if applying pressure to a wound. Smaller, flaky pieces of wood, like sycamore seeds, escape through my fingers and spin downwards.

"Here, Marinka, tie this around it." Yaga Tatyana passes me one of her shawls and I wrap it around the beam and pull it tight. The pieces stop falling, but I can still hear rustling, crackling sounds beneath the fabric.

"Oh, House. I wish I knew what to do."

Yaga Tatyana offers me her hand. I take it and step down to the floor, then sink back into Baba's chair.

"I'm so worried," I say to Yaga Tatyana. "I think all these strange things that have been happening lately are signs that the house is unwell. But I don't know how to help."

Yaga Tatyana nods with understanding while untangling one of the spiky pieces of wood from my hair. "What does your heart tell you?" she asks.

I frown. Yaga Tatyana has been telling me to listen to my heart a lot lately. She says I should trust it to guide me. But the trouble is, after all the

bad decisions I've made, I'm not sure it's a good idea to trust what my heart has to say.

Besides, Yaga Tatyana is an Ancient Elder, impossibly old and wise. I think we should be listening to *her* heart, not mine. But when I suggested this, the last time we spoke about the house, she said that I know the house better than anyone, and that young hearts can be trusted as much as old hearts anyway.

Yaga Tatyana moves to the fire, where a pan of *kasha* – buckwheat porridge – is bubbling away. She stirs it silently and I sigh, realizing Yaga Tatyana isn't going to say anything else until I've thought about what my heart is telling me. This is her way of encouraging me to work things out myself.

I look around the front room, from Baba's great cauldron hanging in the fireplace, to the big table where we serve the feasts for the dead, to the shelves that hold *The Book of Yaga* and all the volumes of *Yaga Tales*, and finally to the corner where most of Baba's old musical instruments are still stacked – her violin, flute, accordion and more. Almost everything in here is related to guiding, which of course is not surprising in a Yaga house.

The house loves the parties for the dead. They are its reason for being.

"Does the house need a guiding?" I ask finally. "I know it draws energy from guiding the dead, but since it settled here, in The Land of Lakes, we haven't done nearly as many guidings as we used to. Perhaps the house is run-down and tired, and that's why it's struggling?"

"Perhaps." Yaga Tatyana puts a lid over the *kasha* to let it simmer, then sits on her chair beside me.

"If the house needs a guiding, it usually stands up and takes us somewhere so we can do one," I continue. "But it hasn't done that in over a month." I look up at the rafters. "Shall we go for a guiding tonight, House?"

Jack tumbles through one of the skylights, lands on my shoulder and squawks so loudly into my ear I wince. He's clearly excited by the prospect of a guiding, but the house doesn't show any sign of even hearing me.

Yaga Tatyana presses her lips together thoughtfully, then leans close. "Do you remember me telling you about my house growing old and retiring from guiding the dead?"

"Yes, but my house can't want to retire," I say quickly. "It's still young."

Yaga Tatyana says nothing and her silence pricks at my skin. I think about how I don't actually know how old my house is – and I don't know

how old is old for a house with chicken legs either. I push these thoughts away.

"The house probably needs some encouragement," I say decisively. "If we spend the day preparing a feast for a guiding, it won't be able to resist. We can bake black bread and cook a cauldron of *borsch.* Fill the table with bowls and spoons, pots of sour cream and horseradish, glasses for *kvass* and spirit *trost*. The scents of a guiding will fill the air. And later, when Benjamin comes over, he can play music on Baba's *balalaika* – he is getting really good at it now. Then the house will surely jump up and run somewhere we can guide. I know it!" I beam at my plan, feeling sure it will work – or at least that it can't do any harm. "What do you think, House? You're bound to feel more like yourself after a guiding."

The house tenses and I hold my breath. I can feel it worrying, although I'm not sure why.

Finally, with a long sigh through its chimney, the house seems to relax a little. I smile, deciding to take this as a sign of agreement. "Thank you, House!" I turn to Yaga Tatyana, hoping for her approval. She continues sitting thoughtfully for a moment, but then a smile grows on her face too.

"Why not?" she says, rising to her feet. "You know I love a good party for the dead. Let's go and see what food we have in the pantry."

Yaga Tatyana and I spend the day preparing a guiding feast. Just as I'd planned, the scents of foods baking and bubbling fill the air, familiar and comforting, but full of excitement too.

Benjamin comes over after school and, after getting permission from his father, agrees to come to the guiding with us – if the house does decide to take us for one. I tiptoe into Baba's bedroom, which is as she left it, apart from being draped in dust now, and I retrieve her *balalaika*. I keep it on Baba's bed because it was her favourite musical instrument, which she always played me lullabies on before I fell asleep. I tried to teach myself to play it, but I don't have the patience. Benjamin is very good with it though and he sits near the window strumming songs, while Yaga Tatyana sings.

The sun sets and my fingers and toes twitch with anticipation. Everything is ready. I just need the house to move. Minutes feel like hours. I stop myself from shouting at the house to leave. It needs to do this in its own time.

Finally, as stars twinkle through the skylights, thin green tendrils grow from the floor and walls. They thicken into vines that curl around the furniture and the loose items on the table and shelves, securing them in place. Then the house swings up onto its long, thin legs and a smile bursts across my face. I rush to the window, slipping and sliding on the way, then sit beside Benjamin, so I can watch the view drift past.

The house walks steadily north, up and over the mountains, then breaks into a run as it reaches flatter ground. Benjamin plays faster. Yaga Tatyana sings louder. Jack flies around the room, squawking gleefully. The cauldron bubbles and bottles of spirit *trost* clink together like musical chimes.

I take a deep breath of the cold night air flowing in through the window and laugh with delight. It’s wonderful to be moving again, heading somewhere new and unknown. The house runs faster and faster; my red hair blows in the wind and I fill with happiness and hope.

Tonight, we’ll have such a party! The house will be refreshed and revived, then it will stop acting so strangely. And perhaps I will feel refreshed too. The grief toad and the guilt bees might go to sleep for a while. And all the worries I have now might drift away to the stars, like the dead at the end of the night.

The Land of Castles and Giants

The house settles on top of a tall mountain in The Land of Castles and Giants. A cold wind blows, rattling the roof tiles and making the house shiver. Yaga Tatyana puts more wood on the fire and finishes the preparations for the feast while Benjamin and I go outside to build the skull-and-bone fence.

I pull my woollen hat down over my ears and look up at the sky. It's vast and cloudless and bright with stars. Perfect for a guiding.

The skeleton store swings open and the bones tumble out. Benjamin and I gather an armful each and carry them a short distance from the house.

"There are some soft, peaty areas between the rocky bits." Benjamin pushes a femur into the frost-sparkled ground with gloved hands.

"Good. The fence is always easier to build when the ground is soft."

Jack lands on a nearby skull and watches as we sink more bones into the earth and string vertebrae between them.

I glance over to Benjamin. There is a faint line between his eyebrows, which only appears when he's worried about something. "Are you all right?" I ask.

"I've been thinking about that other school again. I'm supposed to decide soon."

"It sounds really good." I smile encouragingly. Benjamin has been offered a place in a specialist art school. It's further away than the one we go to now, but I think Benjamin would love it there. He seems nervous about making the decision though.

“It does sound good, but I’m still not sure.” Benjamin sighs. “It took me so long to settle into the school we’re at now. It’s only during this last year that I’ve finally started to feel like I fit in and made a few friends…and a best friend.” Benjamin glances over to me and smiles shyly. “If I move school,” he continues, his smile fading, “then I’ll lose all that and have to start again.”

“We’ll always be friends, even if you move school.” I pick up a foot bone and wire it into the hinge of the bone-gate. “And I’m sure you’d make some new friends too.” I pause as I look for another foot bone for the other hinge. “Remember when we met? I was building the skull-and-bone fence, like we are now, and you seemed to appear out of nowhere.”

“I had Benji under my arm, when he was a tiny lamb.” Benjamin smiles at the memory.

“I wanted to make friends with you, but I wasn’t sure how. I felt awkward and kept thinking I was saying or doing the wrong thing. But you were kind and friendly, and even though our lives were completely different, we found things in common. And then we…just became friends.” I glance up at Benjamin, who is helping me attach the bone-gate to the rest of the fence. “And somehow now it feels like we’ve always been friends.”

Benjamin nods, but the line between his eyebrows is still there.

“I know not every friendship is like that, and not everyone you meet becomes a friend. But I think what I’m trying to say is that you never know when you are going to meet someone who will become important to you.” I swing the bone-gate open and closed, to check the hinges are working. “Friendship feels like a kind of magic to me. I don’t think you can predict when it will happen, but I think it’s always worth looking for.”

“Thanks, Marinka. That helps, a bit. I’m still not sure I’m brave enough to start all over again, but I’ve got another week or so to decide.” Benjamin rises to his feet and looks along the fence. “Just the skulls left to do.”

“I’ll do them if you like, and you could put the bones we didn’t use back in the store?”

Benjamin nods, so I walk the length of the fence, balancing skulls on top and lighting the candles inside them. Warm light glows through their empty eye sockets and shines across the mountains, beckoning the dead.

As I walk back towards Benjamin, they gather in the distance – wispy dead souls that become more solid as they move slowly towards the house. I take a deep breath, preparing myself for the night ahead.

Baba always said guiding the dead was a serious responsibility, but I didn't understand that fully until after she'd gone. I didn't appreciate why Baba loved doing it so much either. I wish I could tell her that I understand now. Giving the dead one last party to celebrate their lives before they return to the stars is not just a serious responsibility, it's an honour and something I now feel proud to be part of.

Every time I help Yaga Tatyana with the guidings, I do my best to make the night as wonderful as possible for the dead. And I always end up having a wonderful time too. It makes me think about Baba though.

Baba was always so alive when she was guiding the dead. I see her everywhere on nights like this. Stirring the *borsch*. Playing her accordion. Laughing and talking in the language of the dead. Shouting "*Trost!*" and pulling a cork out of a bottle with her crooked teeth. She was always so beautiful, dancing among the dead, bringing comfort and joy.

As my mind fills with happy memories of Baba, the bees buzz in my chest and I take another deep breath, wishing I could calm them.

I know, from guiding the dead, that guilt and regrets are often carried like heavy loads for whole lifetimes, right until our last days. If that is going to be true of my lifetime, then I wish I at least knew how to make these burdens less painful to carry.

"Marinka! Help!" Benjamin shouts and even though he sounds distressed, I am relieved by the distraction from my thoughts. I rush over to where he's standing beside the door to Yaga Tatyana's store, which is next to the skeleton store tucked into the side of the house.

Between the two stores is a faded seam, along which Yaga Tatyana's house and my house grew together, although the house has reshaped and rearranged itself so many times since then that it doesn't feel like two houses joined. The rooms that were in Yaga Tatyana's house have jumbled with the rooms that were in my house, making one bigger, beautiful house that somehow feels like it was always meant to be like this.

"It's biting my finger!" Benjamin shrieks as he wrestles with the jawbone lock that holds the door to Yaga Tatyana's store shut.

"Hold still." I reach past Benjamin's finger to the hinge of the lock, loosen the hidden wire holding the jaw together, then prise the bones apart. The lock releases Benjamin and gnashes its teeth at me instead. I roll my eyes. "There's no need to be so aggressive. I'm sure Benjamin wasn't trying to open you."

“I was only walking past.” Benjamin slips off his glove and rubs his finger. “It grabbed me.”

“Sorry. The lock has a nasty habit of doing that. It’s always been very protective of Yaga Tatyana’s store.” I peer at Benjamin’s finger. “The skin isn’t broken, is it?”

Benjamin shakes his head. “I’m all right. It gave me a fright more than anything.” He backs away from the lock. “What is it protecting in there, anyway?”

“Yaga Tatyana keeps all the potions and powders she uses for her experiments and concoctions in that store,” I explain. “Some of them are dangerous – explosive or toxic.” I lean close to Benjamin and whisper, “Also, I glimpsed a mortar and pestle in there once. It was one of the ancient ones.”

Benjamin stares at me blankly and it takes me a moment to realize he has no idea what I’m talking about. “A mortar is a kind of bowl and a pestle is a club-shaped tool that fits inside it. They’re usually small and used for crushing and grinding herbs or other ingredients. But…” I smile, excited to tell Benjamin about the ancient ones. “Long ago, some Yaga – Ancient Elders, like Yaga Tatyana, who have lived for more than one thousand years – had huge mortars and pestles that they flew in.”

“Flew?” Benjamin’s eyes widen in disbelief and I nod.

“I wish I could have seen one fly, or – even better – flown in one myself. Imagine how amazing that would be!”

“It sounds pretty scary to me,” Benjamin says nervously.

“I guess we’ll never know.” I sigh. “They were forbidden hundreds of years ago, even before my grandmother Baba was born, so she never got to fly in one either.”

“Why were they forbidden?” Benjamin asks.

“Because of the living,” I grumble. “They get easily scared of things they don’t understand, then do cruel or dangerous things. Long ago, one of the living threw something at a Yaga who was flying in a mortar and pestle. It hurt her badly, so it was decided not to use them any more. Yaga houses stopped growing them, and the ones that already existed disappeared over the years. I didn’t think there were any left, until I saw the one in Yaga Tatyana’s store. But it must stay hidden in there, like the house must hide its legs and I must hide the fence bones and not talk about guiding the dead.

Unless we're far away from the living, of course." I sweep my arms across the empty mountains, draped in darkness.

"Is that why you're unhappy in The Land of Lakes now?" Benjamin asks.

"What?" Benjamin's question takes me by surprise. "I'm not unhappy."

Benjamin looks at me searchingly. "You aren't exactly happy though, are you? You haven't been to school properly for weeks – since even before the house started acting strangely. Is it because you must hide a part of who you are? I don't think anyone should have to do that."

"I've always thought it's unfair that Yaga are supposed to hide from the living," I admit. "And sometimes I feel like I live in three different worlds, because I am living, dead and Yaga. But I'm so used to that by now, that's not why…" I struggle to find the right words to explain how I feel. "In the Land of Lakes I have everything I ever dreamed of – a life with the living! I can go to school, visit the library, explore the town and the lake. Yaga Tatyana takes care of me and I have neighbours, friends…and a best friend." I smile at Benjamin and he smiles shyly back. "So I am happy there, but…I don't know. I just thought I would feel more settled by now somehow."

"Do you miss travelling the world with your house?" Benjamin asks. "Sometimes I think staying in The Land of Lakes must seem pretty dull compared with all the adventures you had before."

"I don't want to go back to travelling all the time. I *want* to feel settled. But I do feel like something is missing." I take a deep breath and look up to the stars. "Maybe it's because I miss Baba so much."

Benjamin nods with understanding. His mother died when he was a baby, but I know he thinks about her all the time and misses her too.

"And…" I think about telling Benjamin about the bees I'm carrying, but the words won't come out. "I'm worried about the house," I say instead, which is true and my biggest concern at the moment. "I hope tonight's guiding gives the house the energy it needs to heal whatever is wrong."

"I hope so too," Benjamin says.

I look over to the dead, who are gathering closer. "We should go inside and make sure everything is ready."

Benjamin nods again and we head back into the house together. Jack's claws click against the porch floorboards as he follows us in an excited walk – I imagine he's thinking of all the scraps of food he will procure tonight. I hold the door open for him and feel the house trembling. It's

scared, and full of doubts that I don’t understand. I’ve never known the house to feel like this before.

A shiver of fear runs through me. *What if tonight doesn’t help? What if I’ve got all this wrong?*

I suddenly wonder if having a guiding is a good idea. My heart feels uneasy, and Yaga Tatyana has been telling me to listen to it. But how can I know the right thing to do when my heart doesn’t give a clear answer? I look up at the eaves, hoping the house might give me a sign. But there is none.

“Marinka!” Yaga Tatyana shouts. “You’re letting cold air in!”

“Sorry!” I step through the door, close it behind me and look around the front room. It’s warm and inviting. Everything is ready for a guiding and the dead are on their way. So, we might as well do this. I pull my shoulders back and try to shake off my worries.

After all, the house and I must have guided thousands of souls together by now. Nothing could go wrong. *Could it?*

A Party for the Dead

Flames are roaring in the hearth, the table is laid for a feast and Yaga Tatyana is pouring *kvass* into rows of stout glasses. “Are you ready, Yaga Marinka and Yaga Benjamin?” she asks with a smile.

Benjamin blushes. He is always shy during guidings – perhaps because he struggles with the language of the dead – so he prefers to sit in a corner playing Baba’s *balalaika* as the night unfurls. He retreats there now and strums a soft and welcoming tune.

I take off my coat and hat and smooth down my black velvet dress. It was a gift from Yaga Tatyana and has colourful skulls and flowers round the edges. I always wear it for guidings, along with Baba’s headscarf which is decorated with skulls and flowers too. I drape the scarf over my hair and tie it at the nape of my neck. Then I put on my serving apron and stand by the door, ready to welcome the dead.

The first to arrive is an old woman, faint and fuzzy round the edges, looking lost and confused. “Eva?” she asks uncertainly.

I shake my head as I help the woman to a chair. She is not the first of the dead to confuse me with someone they knew in life. “I am Yaga Marinka. Welcome,” I say. “You are here because you are dead. Tonight, we will celebrate your life and give you strength for your long journey to the stars. Would you like some *borsch*?”

“You have been wandering a long time in need of a Yaga house, I think.” Yaga Tatyana sits beside the woman. “Do you remember your name?”

“Anna. I have walked far, looking for my sister.” The old woman smiles up at me as I serve her food. “You look like her – my sister, Eva – but when

she was young, of course. I remember now, I am old…so old. And Eva was old too, when she died last year. Will I see her in the stars?" Anna asks hopefully and my breath catches in my throat. I'm not sure how to answer that. When I looked for Baba in the stars, I couldn't find her – not as I remembered her anyway. I think she had become something else, something I didn't understand and perhaps never will while I am living.

"We are all part of the great cycle," Yaga Tatyana says brightly. "Now eat, drink and remember, dear Anna. Think about what you will take with you to the stars. More guests have arrived, Yaga Marinka!"

I return to the door and welcome more dead. The house soon fills with them and as they eat and drink and talk about their lives, they become more solid, more sure of themselves and why they are here. They talk about their joys and sorrows, their prides and regrets. Laughter rises up to the rafters, where Jack is sat watching, and Benjamin plays faster, livelier tunes.

A few of the dead pick up some of Baba's other musical instruments and join in. An old man plays her accordion and another plays a set of dusty old bagpipes that I didn't even know Baba had. Two old women sing together and a younger woman dances an energetic dance full of hops and leaps.

Jack flies down and sits on Benjamin's shoulder, where he has a better view of the party and is closer to the food.

Yaga Tatyana serves the spirit *trost* and the party gets noisier and merrier. Smiles widen, eyes sparkle and laughter swells. Feet tap and hands clap, and everyone joins in with the dancing. The house bobs in time to the music and opens its skylights wide.

A smile grows on my own face as my worries ebb away. The house feels so much more like itself now, I think everything really is going to be fine.

The stars above twinkle, calling to the dead, and The Gate appears in a corner of the room – the blackness inside it swirling with galaxies of light.

I try not to look at it, because once you do it's hard to pull your gaze away. The firefly flicker of stars…the arcs of colour over the distant glassy mountains…they are mesmerizing. And the way the black ocean whispers, far below… I turn away. I must focus on the dead now. When they are ready, they will need my help.

Anna, the first old woman to arrive, is sat staring into The Gate with wistful eyes. I sit beside her quietly. I can almost hear Baba's voice in my head: "*The first stage is to listen. Really listen. Let her tell you her memories and relive her time on Earth.*"

Anna puts her hand over mine. Her skin feels cold, and delicate as silk. “I grew up in a small village on the edge of a vast forest,” she begins.

The room fades, as it always does at these times, and Anna’s memories become real around me. I smell pine trees and feel a soft carpet of their needles beneath my feet. I hear Anna, as a young child, laughing as she plays with her sister, Eva, in the forest. Her sister does look like me – we both have curly red hair and a freckled nose. I smile as I watch Eva stamp her feet during a game. Baba always said I was stubborn and fiery too.

Anna’s memories flood into me now and I gasp as I feel her emotions. My heart swells with joy as she travels the world and sees cities and oceans and skies bigger than she dreamed possible. She listens to storytellers everywhere she goes, and the excitement she feels at their tales rushes through me. It reminds me of the excitement I always felt when Baba would tell me stories, especially ones about my parents.

Then a comforting warmth envelops me as Anna returns to the village where she grew up. She becomes a storyteller there, captivating children and grown-ups with her tales, night after night, year after year. Anna learns to weave too, and creates story blankets for her listeners to sit on and snuggle under, that show pictures from her many tales.

My cheeks ache from smiling as Anna falls in love with a carpenter named Kolya and they build a happy home in a small clearing in the forest. Years fly by. Anna and Kolya grow old together, then Anna’s sister comes to live with them. Eva is old now too. Her red hair is greying and she is heavy with a grief that I don’t understand. I take a deep breath as it falls over me, then I breathe slowly through Anna’s own grief when her sister dies.

The room swings back into focus as Anna turns to me. Her eyes are glistening with tears, but she is smiling. “It was a good life, full of love and laughter. There was loss too, of course. But that only hurt so much because of the love.” Anna rises to her feet.

“Are you ready for your journey?” I ask.

Anna nods. “How will I know the way?”

“Your soul knows. It will guide you now.” I help Anna walk towards The Gate. “What do you take with you to the stars?”

“The power of stories.” Anna smiles. “I always loved the stories.”

I smile too, remembering how storytelling made Anna feel and all the lives she touched with her tales.

Yaga Tatyana appears at our side and gives Anna one last drink of spirit *trost* – it's named *trost* after a walking stick because it helps the dead on their journey. Then Yaga Tatyana kisses Anna's cheeks and nods to me.

I hold Anna's hands as I speak the death journey words, clearly and calmly. "*May you have strength on the long and arduous journey ahead. The stars are calling for you. Move on with gratitude for your time on Earth. Every moment now an eternity. You carry with you memories of infinite value, the power of stories.*"

Anna lets go of my hands, steps through The Gate and drifts away into the darkness.

"*Peace at returning to the stars. The great cycle is complete.*"

Something rumbles like thunder, and the house wobbles so violently I nearly fall to the floor. "What was that?" Dread shudders through me and I grab hold of Baba's chair for support.

Another rumble sounds, even louder than the first. The house wobbles again, then an ominous creaking, scraping sound fills the air, unlike anything I've ever heard. The Gate suddenly expands. I stare at it in horror. Nothing like this has happened before. I turn to Yaga Tatyana. Her eyes are wide, reflecting an image of me looking scared.

The music stops and the dancing too. Silence swells in the room and the edges of the dead become blurry again. I turn back to The Gate, heart thumping. The Gate is now twice as big as it should be and is swelling and rippling like an incoming tide.

There is another rumble, followed by a deafening bang, and with a rush of cold, damp air The Gate explodes outwards, then begins pulling everything towards it.

The Gate Explodes

The dead get pulled into The Gate first. They are lifted off their feet and swept into the expanding darkness on icy winds.

"No!" I shout, reaching for the woman who had been dancing energetically only moments ago. "They haven't been guided properly!" I yell, but the woman slips through my fingers, speeds away and disappears.

Cold air whirls around my body, tugging me towards The Gate too. I duck behind Baba's chair and look around urgently for Yaga Tatyana, Benjamin and Jack.

Benjamin is on the far side of the room, his eyes wide with fright as he clutches the windowsill with one hand and Baba's *balalaika* with the other. Jack is on his shoulder, flapping his wings and squawking angrily in the direction of The Gate.

Yaga Tatyana is standing tall, almost in the centre of the room, holding on to the table for support as she recites the death journey words to the dead flying past her. "*Mayyouhave strength onthelongandarduous journeyahead. The stars arecallingforyou.*" The words sound wrong spoken so fast, in a desperate rush. "*Moveonwith gratitude foryourtimeonEarth. Every moment nowan eternity. Youcarrywithyou memories of infinite value, thelove inyour heart*."

I understand why Yaga Tatyana chose love for the bit at the end that always changes for each soul – it is one of the most common things the dead take to the stars – but the dead should have had the opportunity to tell us themselves. *This is all so wrong!*

"*Peace at returning to the stars. The great cycle is complete*," Yaga Tatyana shouts over the wind, but the dead are already gone.

Tears of fear and frustration escape my eyes and the wind blows them across my cheeks. "Yaga Tatyana!" I shout. "What is happening?"

Yaga Tatyana stares into The Gate, her eyes narrowed in the way they always are when she is trying to figure something out. My fear swells as I realize that if Yaga Tatyana – an Ancient Elder – doesn't know what is going on, then something this terrible can never have happened before.

I peer out from behind Baba's chair to look at The Gate again. It usually closes once the dead have left, but The Gate is showing no sign of getting smaller or disappearing. If anything, it is still swelling – not as much as it was, but the dark edges are continuing to creep over the back wall, towards the corner of the room on one side and the fireplace on the other. And the icy winds are still whirling around, pulling everything towards the twinkling darkness.

A gust wraps around me so powerfully that Baba's chair slides towards The Gate. I grab the chair and try to brace myself against the floor, but only end up skidding towards The Gate too. The wind surges as I near the darkness, tugging me inside. Panic flies through me and I grip the chair tighter.

"Let go of the chair!" Yaga Tatyana shouts. "Reach for me!"

I turn to see Yaga Tatyana's outstretched hand, but I don't want to let go of Baba's chair – her old, comfy chair that she sat in every morning after the guidings, where she told me stories while I sat on my floor cushion and leaned against her knees.

"Marinka!" Yaga Tatyana shouts so loudly that I start. I glance back to The Gate and see my floor cushion whoosh into the darkness and disappear. It's followed by several bowls and spoons, and a glass spilling spirit *trost* as it flies away. Baba's chair edges closer and I realize it will be next.

"Marinka!" Benjamin shouts from the other side of the room and a memory flashes through me of Benjamin shouting my name before, calling me back through The Gate after I went inside, looking for Baba. I can't let myself be pulled into that darkness again. I belong in the land of the living.

A sharp pain tears through my heart as I let go of the chair, turn away from it and reach for Yaga Tatyana. But her hand is now beyond my grasp and she can't reach further as she's holding the table with her other hand, to stop herself from being pulled into The Gate.

The wind rises again and I slip backwards. Cold air engulfs my feet and the icy spray of the black ocean stings my ankles. I dig my nails into the floorboards and try to scramble forwards.

Yaga Tatyana and Benjamin keep shouting my name. Jack squawks loudly. I scream with effort but I can't reach them. Then, just as I think I'm not going to make it, a purple vine wraps itself around my wrist and yanks me away from The Gate. It drags me across the floor and into Yaga Tatyana's arms.

The vine swings up into the rafters and I stare after it. It's one of the house's strange, stinging vines, but it saved me. I'm about to thank the house, but am distracted by having to dodge Baba's accordion and violin case flying through the air. Everything is disappearing into The Gate.

"We need to get Benjamin and Jack and leave this room, Marinka! We'll be pulled into The Gate if we stay." Yaga Tatyana nods towards the corner where Benjamin is gripping the windowsill, Jack on his shoulder and Baba's *balalaika* still clasped in his other hand.

I want to figure out how to close The Gate and save Baba's things. But Yaga Tatyana is right – we need to get to safety first. Together, holding the table at first and then some wall shelves for support, we push against the roaring wind to reach Benjamin and Jack. Then, with all of us clutching each other tightly, we edge further along the wall to the nearest door, which leads to Yaga Tatyana's laboratory – the room where she makes spirit *trost* and her other concoctions.

The icy winds whirl around and between us, threatening to prise us apart and keep us from the door. But we huddle closer and, all pushing together, manage to force the door open. We tumble into the laboratory, push the door shut again, then lean against it, gasping for breath. Jack flaps away to the far side of the room and takes shelter beneath Yaga Tatyana's workbench.

My chest tightens with every crash, bang and skidding noise that reverberates from the other side of the door. I don't want to imagine which of Baba's things are being pulled into The Gate now. Her favourite serving spoon with the carved-bone handle? The horsehair blanket she wrapped around me ever since I was a baby? All the rest of her musical instruments?

"Everything is getting sucked into The Gate!" I sob. "Baba's things! Her chair!" Then I remember the dead whooshing away and feel a sharp sting of guilt for thinking about things when people's souls were pulled inside too.

“The dead weren’t guided properly!” I turn to Yaga Tatyana in despair. “What will happen to them? What can we do?”

“The dead will reach the stars,” Yaga Tatyana says firmly. “They went through The Gate. Their souls know the way and what they carry. But I don’t know how to close The—”

A thunderous crash interrupts Yaga Tatyana, followed by the scrape of something large and heavy sliding across the floorboards. My heart races in panic as I wonder if it’s the table at which Baba and I ate all our meals, and around which so many dead feasted and celebrated their lives.

“We must close The Gate!” I look up at the rafters. “House! Close The Gate! Now!” I yell.

But the noises beyond the door continue – the rush of wind, the crashes and clatters.

Yaga Tatyana puts a hand on my arm. “Marinka, I don’t think the house has control of what is happening.”

“Then how do we stop this?” I look at Yaga Tatyana desperately. She *must* know the answer. But when I look into her eyes, I see she feels as helpless as me.

The door we are leaning against rattles as the wind on the other side threatens to rip it open.

“Should we barricade this?” Benjamin asks, his voice wavering.

“I think that’s a good idea,” Yaga Tatyana agrees. “It will help keep us safe while we figure out what to do. Some of the copper drums over there are heavy and we could probably move this…”

I can’t concentrate on what Yaga Tatyana is saying. The noises coming from the other side of the door are too distracting and I keep thinking of everything that was in that room – our room. I know they are just things, but they hold so many memories of Baba and our life together. The urge to go back in and try to save them is almost as strong as the wind on the other side of the door.

“Marinka, help us with this bench,” Yaga Tatyana calls.

I rush over to Yaga Tatyana and Benjamin and help them lift the heavy workbench. As we drag it towards the door, the sound of metal clanging rings out and I wince, thinking it is probably Baba’s cauldron falling over – which means The Gate must have expanded as far as the fireplace.

“Soon there will be nothing left in there to save!” I cry.

A huge thud shakes the whole house. “A roof beam!” I can’t think of anything else that would make such a loud noise. *What if the house gets pulled into The Gate piece by piece?* I drop the bench and rush to the door, but then stop. I don’t know what to do. If I open the door, I’ll get sucked into The Gate.

A cracking, splintering sound resonates through the walls. The house lurches and the noise grows deafeningly loud. My stomach knots into a tight ball. Then, all at once, the house becomes still. Too still. Not the slightest breath of movement is in its walls. And the wooden floorboards feel cold and lifeless. I try to swallow, but my throat feels knotted now too. *Something is horribly wrong*.

Bones clatter outside as the skull-and-bone fence rushes into the skeleton store. The store slams shut. Then thumps – loud thumps that I would recognize anywhere – echo through the walls. It’s the sound of the house’s giant chicken feet, walking over the earth. *But why are they moving away from us?*

My heart leaps upwards and I tear the door open.

“House! Stop!” I yell, staring in horror at what I hoped I wouldn’t see – but knew, deep down, that I would.

My house has torn itself apart – leaving behind the one room we are in. And the whole of the rest of it is now walking away, over the mountaintop, on its long, thin legs.

The House Runs Away

I grip the door frame for support as I stare at the house walking away from me.

Broken, splintered pieces of wood from where it tore itself apart are smashing down to the ground. Each one feels like a blow to my chest. And the room I'm in – Yaga Tatyana's laboratory – abandoned by the house, feels utterly lifeless, like the shed skin of a snake or the bones of the dead.

A shiver runs through me that is from much more than the cold night air. I feel as if I have been torn apart too, and the most important piece of me is disappearing over the mountaintop. *I can't let this happen.*

Suddenly, I know what I must do. Energy surges into my feet and I take off across the mountain, racing after the house as fast as I can.

Benjamin calls after me, but I don't look back. I keep running, stumbling over rocks in the darkness, my feet squelching into softer earth.

"Marinka!" Yaga Tatyana shouts, her voice quiet in the distance, but I don't stop. I can't let the house get away from me. My gaze is fixed on the silhouette of its huge chicken feet, rising and falling through the darkness.

My heart pounds like a thunder of Yaga houses, drumming out the beat of the words slamming round my mind. *Don't leave me. Don't leave me. Please, House. Don't leave me.* Panic surges with every step. The house is moving away, too fast. I don't see how I can catch it.

"House!" I yell, but it doesn't stop.

The house steps down the steep slope of the mountain and disappears from sight.

“No!” My heart feels like it’s going to burst from my ribcage as I rush to the edge of the mountaintop. *Why is the house doing this? Why would it leave me?*

“*Caaaw!*” Jack slams into my shoulder, throwing me off balance. I tumble forwards onto the ground, then can’t stop myself from hurtling down the steep slope.

My limbs smash against rocks as I roll through wet grass and mud. I reach out, frantically trying to grab something, anything, to halt my fall. The world spins around me; the starry sky, the black mountains, sinewy branches of shrubs and tangled veins of bracken. But I can’t see the house any more and that makes me panic more than the fall.

I think I hear Benjamin’s voice on the wind, but then Jack shrieks above me, drowning out all other sounds. His wings beat against me and his claws scratch my back and arms. I wonder if he’s trying to steer me towards the house and – even though I don’t see how he possibly could – hope fizzes through me. Then I thump into something hard and warm and familiar. *The house’s foot!*

I immediately grip one of the huge clawed toes with all my limbs just as it rises from the ground in another step. A scream that had been trapped in my throat since I first fell escapes my mouth as I’m whooshed off the ground and up into the air, clinging on for my life. I’m carried forwards, then plunged back down towards the ground. Fear that I’m going to be crushed surges through me.

I scramble upwards, from the toe to the top of the foot, and hold on tight as it slams into mud that spatters over my whole body. Then I’m whooshed up into the air again. I manage to crawl onto the ankle and grip the leg with my arms. I need to get up to the house, to talk to it and persuade it to stop, and the only way is to climb the leg and find the trapdoor on the underside of the porch.

But the house is moving so fast through the darkness, it’s difficult to see what I’m doing. I feel my way upwards, using the gnarled and knotty bits of wood on the house’s leg as foot- and handholds. Each time the house’s foot thumps down, I’m forced to stop climbing and brace myself against the impact.

Jack has his claws on my dress and is flapping his wings, trying to pull me upwards. I’m not sure if it’s helping or hindering, but I’m glad he’s with me.

The house breaks into a run – it must have reached flatter ground – and I grip the leg tight, feeling nauseous. I'm being swung on great long strides and I'm not even halfway to the porch yet. I could manage this climb so much easier if only the house would stop moving.

"House! Stop! Please!" I shout breathlessly, but it runs on, showing no sign of hearing me at all. I groan as I'm swung forwards again. Jack squawks and tugs me upwards. I exhale slowly. He's right, I need to concentrate on the climb.

I reach up with hand, then foot, over and over, as I try to ignore the swinging of the leg. The ground rushes past below. In the distance I glimpse rolling hills and stars above. We're heading east, but I don't know where to.

My muscles burn with the effort of the climb and my hands sting from gripping the gnarled wood. By the time I reach the underside of the porch, I'm scared I might fall from sheer exhaustion.

Giant feathers, as long as I am tall and as wide as my body, hang down from the wooden floor above me. They sway with the house's movement and are black in the darkness – although I know in sunshine they glisten with iridescence like starlings' wings.

I push the nearest feather aside, looking for the trapdoor. It's been a long time since I used it. When I was younger, I would squeeze through from above to play beneath the porch, swinging from feather to feather and pretending I was in a playground. Or sometimes I'd make a cosy den amongst the house's folded legs and soft feathers, and read by the light of a skull lantern.

But I've never climbed through the trapdoor while the house was moving.

I struggle in panic to find the door. I reach higher with my hand and feel the underside of the floorboards, hoping to find a crack, but there's nothing. I groan in frustration. I must get onto the porch – I don't know how much longer I can hold on under here.

Jack lets go of me and flutters up amongst the feathers. He screeches loudly, then pecks on the floorboards with his beak not far from where my hand was. *He's found the trapdoor!*

"Thank you, Jack!" I lean further out, but with a crash of terror realize I will have to let go of the leg and climb through the feathers to reach the door. I tug the nearest feather, to check it will take my weight. I know they

did when I was younger, but it’s been years since I swung around under here.

The feather doesn’t come loose, so I take a leap of faith, grab it with both hands and swing towards the trapdoor. With a rush of fear and hope, I reach up and slam hard against the door. It flies open and hits the floor on the other side, leaving a neat square to climb through.

Jack flaps through first and I wriggle up after him, drag myself onto the floorboards and lie there gasping with relief. Finally, I’m safe on the porch. But I’ve left Yaga Tatyana and Benjamin far behind, in a broken room on a lonely mountaintop. And I have no idea where the house is running to, or how to stop it.

Running Through the Night

Once my breathing calms, I sit up and peer into the night in the direction the house is running, while Jack paces along the balustrade above me anxiously.

We've left the mountains far behind and are now racing across flat, grassy lowlands. An ocean sparkles in the distance, a silver streak on its dark surface from the light of a newly risen crescent moon. The house is hurtling towards the water, as fast as it's ever run before.

A hot flare of indignation burns through me as I think how the house tore itself apart and ran away from me. But then the house lurches slightly, and I notice how uneven the rhythm of its footsteps is, and how it's stumbling a little with every step. *The house is scared, more so than ever before.*

Goosebumps rise on my skin as I stand and edge towards the front windows. The house has closed its shutters, but I know there is a small crack in one of them. I peek through and stare in dismay at how large The Gate has grown.

The rectangle of darkness now fills the far wall, and there is almost nothing left in the front room. The fireplace is gone and the cauldron that hung inside it, all the chairs and the table where the dead feast. There is even a roof beam missing – the crumbling one that I wrapped Yaga Tatyana's shawl around.

Only a few shelves remain, held in place by thick vines for now. Wind is whirling around them so powerfully I imagine it would lift me off my feet. Cold air rushes through the crack, pulling me towards The Gate even from here. I back away.

I understand why the house is so scared. And – I realize with a start – I know why it tore itself apart and ran away too.

"You were trying to protect me, Yaga Tatyana, Benjamin and Jack, weren't you?" I look up at the eaves, but the house doesn't respond. "The Gate is growing and pulling everything inside and you can't stop it. Can you, House?"

The house runs on through the darkness, and I try to swallow back a rising dread. If The Gate keeps expanding, it will pull the house inside, piece by piece, and then… My gaze drifts beyond the house to the landscape whizzing by, and a rush of dizziness hits me. I don't want to think about what would happen next.

I slide down to the floor and wrap my arms around my chest. I'm cold in my wet and mud-spattered dress, aching from tumbling down the steep slope and from climbing the house's leg, and horribly frightened.

Jack leans down and chirrs something into my ear. He's looking for comfort, so I reach up and stroke his neck. I want to say something to reassure him too, but no words will form. I suddenly feel very alone and helpless.

"Marinka!"

My heart leaps at the sound of Benjamin's voice. *It's coming from beneath the porch!*

"Marinka!"

Jack rushes over to the trapdoor and I hurry after him, then gasp at the sight of Benjamin, dangling below. He's gripping one of the house's huge feathers with one hand and struggling to reach the floorboards with the other.

I grasp Benjamin's hand and help him scramble onto the porch beside me, where Jack flaps around us, squawking with excitement.

"That climb was terrifying," Benjamin says breathlessly. His face is flushed and his clothes are as wet and muddy as mine.

"You chased after me?" I stare at Benjamin, emotions rushing through me. The numbness of disbelief is replaced by a wave of warm gratitude that Benjamin would do this, followed by a swell of relief that I'm not here alone. "You chased after me!" I throw my arms around Benjamin, which makes Jack squawk even louder. "Oh! But Yaga Tatyana!" I lean back as with a sharp twist of worry I realize this means she will be on her own.

“I didn’t have time to think.” Benjamin’s words tumble out apologetically. “I saw you running and before I knew it I was running after you, then I skidded down that steep slope and crashed into one of the house’s legs. And you were climbing, so I followed…” Benjamin takes a deep breath and I notice his fingers trembling. “I wanted to help you, or at least be with you so you’re not here by yourself, but then I kept thinking I was going to fall…” Benjamin swallows hard. Jack flutters onto his shoulder and nuzzles his neck affectionately.

I put my hand over Benjamin’s and squeeze. “I’m glad you made it up here. And I’m sorry I ran off like that—”

“I understand,” Benjamin rushes in. “The house means everything to you, so you had to chase after it. I think that’s why I chased after—” Benjamin stops talking and his ears blush pink. He looks along the porch, to the jagged, broken wall at the far end, where Yaga Tatyana’s laboratory used to be. “Do you know why the house has done this?” he asks.

I hesitate for a moment, wondering whether to downplay my fears so they don’t frighten Benjamin any more than he already is. But once I open my mouth, everything floods out. “The Gate is huge and the house is scared, and it’s awful, Benjamin. I think the house tore itself apart and left us behind to protect us, because The Gate is a danger to everything around it. If it keeps growing, it could be a danger to the whole of the land of the living, even.”

My words hang in the air, crackling like an incoming storm.

Benjamin pales. “I don’t understand how this could happen,” he says quietly. “The Gate always closes after a guiding.”

“I’ve never seen or heard of anything like it.” I lean back against the balustrade beside Benjamin and stare at the house’s walls, desperately trying to work out why it all went so wrong. “I thought a guiding would help the house – give it the energy it needs to feel better – but it’s made everything a million times worse.”

Moonlight illuminates one of the faded seams in the walls, along which Yaga Tatyana’s house and my house grew together. A troubling thought creeps into my mind. “Maybe The Gate expanded because the house needed more energy than usual. It has been struggling lately, and perhaps that’s because it has given so much of itself this last year.”

Benjamin follows my gaze. “Are you thinking about how your house grew together with Yaga Tatyana’s house?” he asks.

I nod. “It must have taken a lot of energy to do that, and the house has been carrying all the extra weight ever since. And it hasn’t been getting half as much energy from guidings as it used to, because we haven’t been doing as many since—” I stop, crushed by an awful realization. “Since the house made me alive,” I say finally, thinking how when the house did that, it gave me a huge amount of its energy too, which I can’t imagine it has ever been able to replenish.

I look up at the eaves, hoping for some kind of acknowledgement of my thoughts, but there is no indication that the house has even heard me. I know in my heart I’m right though, and for the first time in over a year I trust what it is telling me – even though I don’t like it.

“The house is suffering because it has given too much and now it’s lost control of The Gate and I don’t know what to do.” A sob rises in my throat and I cover my face with my hands.

Jack leans down and tries to push his beak between my fingers.

“I don’t know what to do either,” Benjamin says softly. “But I know we’ll figure this out together.”

Something loosens in my chest. It helps, to know that I’m not alone, and I wonder if I can give the house something of that feeling.

I lower my hands to the floorboards and feel the erratic pulse of the house and the faltering rhythm of its run. Fear, panic and uncertainty are woven into every step. I close my eyes and try to send my most comforting thoughts into the house – how much I love it; how it is my family, my friend and my last treasured link to Baba; how I am thankful for its love and care, every day of my life; and how I want to help it now, in any way I can.

“I’m here for you, House,” I whisper. “You don’t have to do this alone.”

The porch balustrade gives slightly, curving around me. I’m not sure if it’s an instinctive reaction – because I’m leaning against it – or if the house has finally heard me and is choosing to hug me back. But I feel a warm rush of love for the house either way, followed by a surge of determination. “We are going to find a way to fix this, House, and make you well again. I promise, with all my heart and soul.”

“Umm…is the house going to run into the water?” Benjamin asks nervously, pointing at an approaching shore. The house is racing towards it without slowing.

Before I get a chance to answer, the house surges into the water with a great splash. A cold wave soaks my and Benjamin’s already-damp clothes.

Jack squawks angrily and flops into my lap, where I put an arm over him to shield him from more splashes.

Waves lap against the porch steps as the house begins swimming eastwards through the ocean.

“The house can swim!” Benjamin shouts incredulously.

“I thought you knew that.” I smile at his amazement.

“Well, I do now.” Benjamin smiles back. “I only wish I knew where it was swimming to.”

I turn and put my hands on the spindles of the balustrade, wondering if the house does know where it’s going. The wood thrums beneath my touch with a conviction that I’d not felt before, and I think how since The Gate exploded and the house tore itself apart, it has been travelling east.

A bubble of hope swells inside me. “The house isn’t running away – it’s running *to* somewhere. I can feel it!” I glance back at the eaves and the house gives me a nod.

I gasp with delight. This is the first time the house has definitely, clearly told me something in weeks. “The house knows where it’s going!” I shout excitedly.

“Do you think it’s somewhere that will help it close The Gate?” Benjamin asks.

“It must be.” I look out across the moonlit ocean. “I can’t see land ahead yet though, so it may be a while before we get there.”

“Do you think Yaga Tatyana will be all right? I feel bad about leaving her on the mountaintop.”

“Me too. But I think she’ll be fine,” I say, trying to reassure myself as much as Benjamin. “Sometimes she works in her laboratory all day, so she has all kinds of useful things squirrelled away in there – drinks and snacks and woollen shawls. And as soon as the house closes The Gate, we’ll go back for her.”

“Then to The Land of Lakes?” Benjamin asks. “My father will be so worried if we’re not back by morning.”

I nod heavily. “We’ll return to him as soon as we can,” I say, hoping to offer at least some comfort to Benjamin.

Jack, still sitting in my lap, tucks his head beneath his wing. I stroke his soft feathers, wondering how he can sleep at a time like this, but the gentle rocking of the house on the waves soon makes me yawn. If I wasn’t so cold and wet, I might fall asleep too.

A blanket suddenly falls over me and Benjamin. I look up in shock to see one of the stinging vines retreating to the eaves. Tears well in my eyes at this familiar act of kindness, after the house behaving so strangely for so long. “Thank you, House.”

I arrange the blanket over my and Benjamin’s legs. It’s the horsehair blanket Baba wrapped around me ever since I was a baby. I assumed it had been sucked into The Gate, so it feels wonderful to have it close.

I yawn again and rest my head against Benjamin’s shoulder. “And thank you, Benjamin, for chasing after me. I’m glad you’re here.”

“I am too,” Benjamin says quietly.

I close my eyes and try to bury my fears beneath more hopeful thoughts about where the house is going, what we’ll find there and how it will help. And before too long, the gentle rocking of the house’s swimming carries me to sleep.

My eyes pop open as I’m jolted by a sudden movement. I must have slept for hours because pale dawn light is pushing back the night and illuminating a low mist, making it shine like gold dust.

Jack is asleep in my lap and Benjamin asleep beside me, his sketchbook resting on his knee. There is a pencil in his hand, hovering over an unfinished drawing of the house swimming through a moonlit ocean. But as I look beyond the balustrade, I realize the ocean we crossed is nowhere in sight.

The house is running again, over a wide expanse of tall, swaying grasses. A vast forest lies ahead of us. Most of the trees are dark conifers, but dotted amongst them are a few with brighter green spring leaves and even a few with yellow and red leaves reflecting the sun’s first rays.

The forest feels familiar, but I can’t think why. Excitement, that this place might hold something to help the house, rises inside me.

The house is rushing, stumbling towards the trees, so eager to reach them its feet are moving too fast for its body. As we draw close, the trees seem to open their branches like a mother opening her arms to a running child. Warmth blooms inside me as I remember Baba doing this for me, when I was small. But then the house leans so far forwards that panic flies through me.

Jack squawks loudly and I grab Benjamin’s arm with one hand and the balustrade with the other to stop us skidding off the porch.

Benjamin wakes and looks around in confusion.

Branches sweep past, some of them hitting the walls of the house. Jack flaps into the air, clearly thinking he is safer flying on his own now, and Benjamin and I scramble to our feet.

The house tilts as it swerves around a towering pine. “Slow down!” I shout, but the house rushes on, stepping over smaller trees, swinging around taller ones, banking and stumbling with its feet lost in the misty undergrowth.

I peer at a shape rising from the mist ahead. It’s a solid dark-grey curve, completely unlike the lattice of surrounding trees. It looks something like a gravestone, but much bigger, and the house is running straight towards it.

“What is that?” Benjamin frowns.

“I’m not sure. Some kind of giant stone marker?” My heartbeat accelerates as the house rushes closer. The stone must be as high as the house’s knees – more than twice my height. Like the forest, it feels familiar, although once again I can’t think why. More importantly, and more worryingly, the house is still stumbling as it runs towards it. “House! Stop!” I yell – too late.

The house trips over the giant stone, one of its legs makes a loud cracking noise, then it plummets towards the ground. I’m flung off the porch and fly through the air for what feels like a terrifying eternity.

I smash through tangled branches then thump onto cold, hard earth. My breath is forced from my lungs and a sharp pain tears through my wrist, as more cracking and crashing sounds reverberate from the house behind me.

I groan as I wobble onto my feet, feeling dizzy and sick. *The house! How badly will it be hurt after that fall?* I peer into the misty half-light of the forest, and turn full circle. But all I see are densely packed trees with thick shadows between them.

Panic flutters through me as I realize I’m alone, and so disorientated I’m not sure which direction I fell from. *Where is the house, and Benjamin and Jack?*

The Giant Stone Marker

“House!” I shout into the dark forest. “Benjamin! Jack!” But there is no response. An overwhelming silence presses down on me.

I turn full circle again, this time looking up at the canopy for broken branches that might indicate which direction the house fell from. I spot a circle of pale lilac, early morning sky surrounded by swaying leaves, and I stumble in that direction, calling out again.

My heart lifts when I hear Jack cawing in response. He crashes through a tangle of branches and lands on my shoulder. His feathers are pulled tight against his body with fear and his head bobs with agitation.

“Marinka!” Benjamin almost collides with me as he rushes out from behind a dense cluster of pines. There are leaves in his hair and a tear in the sleeve of his jumper.

“Are you all right?” I ask.

“Yes, but the house—” Benjamin takes my hand and pulls me in the direction he stumbled from. He weaves between trees and clambers over frosty brambles, before stopping at a large, fallen maple.

I stare in dismay at the scene ahead.

The maple’s thick, dark trunk is freshly cracked and splintered, and its branches have spilled a wide pool of blood-red leaves across the ground.

In the centre of the pool is my house, lying on its side. One of the front shutters is dangling off its hinges and the chimney – which was always crooked – has partially collapsed onto the roof. The house’s legs are splayed out behind it awkwardly and one of them is at completely the wrong angle. *Broken.*

A long, deep crack below the knee is gaping because the lower part of the leg is twisted away from the upper part. I suddenly feel like my heart is cracking and twisting in the same way.

“Oh, House!” I run towards the porch, but the house struggles to pull away from me, its good leg pushing against the ground and the other creaking painfully. I stop, confused.

“It’s The Gate.” Benjamin steps beside me. “Look—” He points to the window with the dangling shutter. Beyond it, the darkness of The Gate swirls and billows against the ceiling and walls of the front room. “The house is trying to move to keep us away from it.”

“We won’t come any closer,” I shout to the house. “Please don’t move, you’ll make your leg worse.”

The house sinks back onto the ground and draws a deep breath in through its crumpled chimney. The eaves shudder as it puffs the air back out again. The house looks so broken, so exhausted, I wish I could scoop it into my arms and hug it tight.

“Where were you running to?” I ask, thinking about how fast the house was racing towards the forest, and the giant stone marker that it tripped over. But the house only takes another shuddering breath as it creaks and buckles even further.

I glance around, looking for the stone marker now, and glimpse the edge of it peeking out from between some trees not far away. But then a rattling sound from the window draws my gaze. The dangling shutter is being pulled back into the house. It breaks free of its hinges, whooshes into the front room and disappears into The Gate.

“Marinka—” Benjamin puts his hand on my arm and tugs me gently backwards as some of the maple leaves at our feet flutter and tumble along the ground towards the house. “The pull of The Gate is getting stronger,” he says, his voice trembling.

I glance up to the trees above. Their branches are curving and their leaves rustling, as they too are drawn towards The Gate.

A small bird suddenly swoops down and gets caught in the pull. It cries a desperate alarm call and flaps its wings furiously. For a moment the bird looks like it’s flying backwards, towards The Gate. But then Benjamin rushes forward and plucks the bird from the air. He cups it carefully in his hands as he retreats back to safety. Then he releases the bird behind us and it flutters away in the opposite direction of the house.

“You were right about The Gate becoming a danger to the land of the living.” Benjamin’s face pales as he turns back to me.

I nod. “We need to figure out how to close The Gate. Until we do, perhaps we should weave a makeshift shutter from branches and try to block the window with it? That might at least help protect everything out here, for now.”

“It’s worth a try.” Benjamin agrees and we hurry over to the fallen maple and begin breaking off branches. A sharp pain in my wrist makes me wince and I remember how I hurt it when the house fell. “Are you all right?” Benjamin asks.

“I think I sprained it when I fell.” I take off Baba’s headscarf and wrap it around my wrist like a bandage while Benjamin weaves some of the larger branches together. Then I help him tuck smaller branches between the bigger ones, until we have a makeshift shutter – untidy, but big enough to cover the window.

“How will we get it over there?” Benjamin asks.

“Let’s get as close as we can, then throw it. Hopefully the wind from The Gate will pull it over the window.”

Benjamin picks up the woven branches. “I’ll do it, because of your wrist,” he offers.

I nod and we edge as close to the house as we dare, coming towards it from the side where the pull of The Gate is weakest. Then Benjamin swings the makeshift shutter around and flings it towards the open window. I hold my breath as I watch it fly through the air. For a moment it looks like it will fall onto the porch, but then it gets swept up in a gust of wind from The Gate, swoops towards the window and is pulled flat against the frame. “Yes!” I jump in triumph. “Well done, Benjamin!”

Jack, watching us from a low branch of a nearby tree, flaps over to Benjamin’s shoulder and cackles appreciatively.

We watch the window for a couple of minutes, to check the woven branches hold firm, and give each other a small smile of victory when they don’t shift and the leaves outside the house stop being pulled towards The Gate.

“What can we do now?” Benjamin asks nervously. “How can we close The Gate to stop it threatening the house and the whole world?” He glances up to the morning sky. “And get home safely,” he adds in a whisper.

I realize Benjamin is thinking of his father, waking in The Land of Lakes now, to find that we haven't returned, and – like last night – his worries weigh heavily on me. Benjamin's father will have no idea what's happened or where we are. And Yaga Tatyana will be just as worried. The bees buzz in my chest and I try to push the feeling away so I can focus on what we need to do next.

The house is asleep now, slumped on its side, walls crooked as if unable to hold their shape and shivering in the cold air. The sun has risen behind the canopy and rays of light are filtering down through the trees. But there is no warmth in them, and mist and frost remain in the shadows. Spring feels even further away in this forest than it did in The Land of Lakes.

"We have to figure out why the house ran here and find whatever it was looking for," I say decisively. "Hopefully whatever that is will be able to close The Gate – and fix House too." I look over to the stone marker. "Let's take a closer look at that."

"Do you think it's what the house was running towards?" Benjamin asks as we set off towards it.

"I'm not sure. But it's the only clue we have." I try to shake out my dress as I walk. It's damp from last night, making me feel even colder than I already am. I'm hungry too and I glance around, wondering if there are any edible plants here I might recognize, but I can't see any. Jack flies ahead of us and alights on top of the stone.

As I first thought, it's shaped like a gravestone, but it's huge – at least three times my height. It's covered in moss and vines so has a softness to its edges, and once again a sense of familiarity flits through my mind like a memory, but disappears before I can catch hold of it.

Benjamin and I walk around the stone slowly, and when we reach the other side, we both stop to stare up at it. There are words carved into this side, barely visible beneath the moss.

A breeze combs through the canopy, shifting branches and leaves, and a sunbeam falls onto the stone's surface. The carved words are illuminated and my skin tingles.

"What alphabet is that?" Benjamin asks. "I don't recognize it."

"It's Cyrillic." A smile warms my cheeks – Baba always loved reading books written in Cyrillic the most.

It takes me a moment to remember the shapes of the sounds the letters make. I know many languages of the living, but since settling in The Land

of Lakes, I've only been using one, that uses the Latin alphabet. Soon though, the words are flowing in my mind and I recite them aloud, translating them as I go for Benjamin. I feel as if I'm half-reading and half-remembering them, and with each word I become more certain that I've read them before.

"Whoever rides straight forwards from here will be cold and hungry;
whoever rides to the right will be safe and sound, but his horse will die;
and whoever rides to the left will himself be killed, but his horse will remain safe and sound."

"I know this!" I exclaim, turning to Benjamin. "I've seen it in a book, and there was an illustration showing this exact scene. Well, almost." I look right and left and notice what could be old trails, bridleways perhaps, now completely overgrown. And straight ahead is another, leading towards my fallen house. "The stone wasn't this big in the illustration, and it stood on more of a plain than in a forest. There were bones scattered on the ground and a knight on horseback, who had set out on a quest and was wondering which path to choose."

"So this stone was in a book?" Benjamin asks. "Like a story book?"

"Yes!" My words rush out as it all comes back to me. "I got the book from the second-hand stall in the market Baba used to take me to, in The Land of Origins. It was a book of fairy tales from all over the world, written by the living. The first story had a witch in it who looked like Baba, so I was excited to read it, but then the witch turned out to be evil, so I didn't like it at all." The anger I felt at the book back then returns to me in a fresh, hot wave. "I hid the book under the porch, worried that it would upset Baba."

Jack, who is pacing across the top of the stone, squawks loudly and nods his head as if he remembers all this.

"Baba found the book though and knew exactly why I'd hidden it. She sat me on her lap, on the porch steps." I glance over to the upturned porch and my breath catches in my throat as I see Baba there, now. She smiles at me, her crooked-toothed smile wide beneath her big, warty nose. Her thinning white hair, floating out from under her skulls-and-flowers headscarf, shines in the forest's green-gold light. I want to run to her and sit on her warm, comfortable lap, like I did that day. But I blink and she's gone.

“Baba held me and the book on her lap,” I continue. “She told me the living often jumbled up the old tales and got things wrong. And she said it was upsetting when they depicted witches or others wrongly or cruelly. But then she opened the book, to the fairy tale with the illustration of this very stone, and said that sometimes the twisted tales of the living were still worth reading, because if you looked carefully you could find important, ancient truths hiding amongst the mistakes.”

“So what was the fairy tale with this stone marker?” Benjamin asks. “Do you remember the knight’s quest?”

I look up at the stone again, excitement bubbling inside me. “It was *The Water of Life*! The knight was going on a quest to get the Water of Life from a well in a magical garden, to restore the eyesight of his father. The story said the Water of Life can cure anything!”

Benjamin’s eyes widen. “So if the Water of Life is real – like this stone – then it could cure the house?”

“Yes!” I clap my hands together with delight, which makes my hurt wrist ache a little – but at least the sharp pain is gone. “This must be what the house was looking for! The Water of Life will close The Gate, heal the house and mend its broken leg. It will fix everything!” I read the stone again, trying to remember which direction the knight took. “The knight in the story rode to the right,” I say. “I’m sure, because I remember thinking it was horrible to choose a path along which your horse would die and I remember being upset when his horse was eaten by a wolf.”

“We don’t have a horse, but I admit I don’t fancy meeting a wolf,” Benjamin says nervously.

I read the choices once more. “These are all terrible choices!” I complain and Jack squawks in agreement. I look at the house again, wondering if it was running straight on because it knew it could get to the Water of Life that way, or if it tripped over the stone before it could turn.

My gaze drifts along the upturned porch, past the skeleton store, to Yaga Tatyana’s store where she keeps all her potions and powders and other special things. And an idea sparks into my mind. I know exactly what we’re going to do.

“None of these choices feel right, so why should we take any of them?” I turn to Benjamin and smile. “I don’t want us to go left and risk death. Or go straight on and get any colder and hungrier than we are already. And you’re right – even though we don’t have a horse, I don’t want to meet a hungry

wolf, or put ourselves in any more danger." I look at the three overgrown trails again. "No, we're definitely not following any of these."

Benjamin looks at me in confusion and Jack eyes me suspiciously from above.

"We're going to make our own path." I walk back towards the house, my smile widening. "We're going to fly in a mortar and pestle over the forest to the garden with the Water of Life. And we're going to bring some back and fix the house." I beam. This feels like the right choice and – like Yaga Tatyana keeps saying I should – I'm going to listen to my heart.

The Mortar and Pestle

“I thought flying mortars and pestles were forbidden.” Benjamin looks up at the house, which is still asleep in a small pool of sunlight. The makeshift window shutter trembles as winds from The Gate swirl behind it.

“They were only forbidden because the living were scared of them, and we’re in the middle of nowhere right now.” I wave a hand at the trees around us. “No one will see us. And the alternative is that we walk through this forest, which could take days. We have no food or water, and the message on the stone marker said there are dangers at every turn. Flying will be the fastest, safest way to get the Water of Life for the house. I’m sure of it.”

I climb onto the house’s good leg and creep along it, towards the upturned porch. Because the house fell on its side, Yaga Tatyana’s store is now awkward to reach – it is on the side of the house that now faces upwards, towards the sky. At least it’s sheltered from the front of the house though, where the pull of The Gate is strongest.

“But do you know how to fly one? And which way to fly?” Benjamin asks as he follows me.

“That’s the best bit of this plan!” I say with excitement. “There is a whole chapter on flying mortars and pestles in *The Book of Yaga* and I read it over and over when I was younger. The chapter says that Yaga form emotional bonds with their mortars, which are what gives the mortars energy to fly and are how Yaga control their flights – a Yaga only has to think and feel where they want to go, and the mortar will fly them there.”

“So if we get into the mortar and think about the garden with the Water of Life, it will fly us there?”

“Exactly!” I nod. “It’s a perfect plan.”

We reach the porch balustrade, clamber over, then walk along the side wall of the house. Jack is perched on the eaves above us, looking down sternly. I don’t think he approves of this plan, but my mind is made up.

The jawbone lock on Yaga Tatyana’s store snaps its teeth as soon we draw close. “Sorry,” I say. “But we need to get in there.” I crouch beside the door, which is now horizontal, and pick up a finger bone that must have spilled from the nearby skeleton store.

I push the bone between the lock’s teeth to stop them snapping at me. Then I reach to the back of the jaw and loosen the hidden wire until the whole lock falls to pieces. “I’ll put you back together as soon as everything else is fixed,” I say to the bones as I sweep them aside.

Benjamin helps me lift the door to the store open and we peer down into a shadowy space filled with crates and barrels.

“I’ll have to climb inside to look for it.” My hurt wrist still aches a little, but I feel sure I can manage it. I hold onto the door frame while I step tentatively down onto a copper barrel weathered with streaks of green. It doesn’t shift, so I take another step down, this time onto an iron box with rusted hinges.

Inside the store, the air smells of dust and chemicals, musty and bitter. I cover my mouth and nose with my bandaged wrist as I climb down further. My eyes adjust to the gloom and finally I see it, in the very bottom of the store: a huge wooden mortar and pestle. My skin tingles with anticipation.

I take another step down and crouch beside the mortar. If it was upright, it would stand higher than my waist, and its bowl is wide enough to hold one grown adult comfortably, or two smaller people at a squeeze. Inside the mortar, resting among layers of frayed cobwebs, is a long pestle, almost twice as thick as my arm.

The wood of both the mortar and pestle is smooth from age and use, and the edge of the mortar’s bowl has a word carved into it, in small, swirling script. I tilt my head to read it. “*Valiant*. Is that your name?”

I think the word means courageous and determined, and as I picture Yaga Tatyana flying in Valiant, fast and fearless, a smile grows on my face. But then the bees buzz when I think of Yaga Tatyana now, alone and abandoned on a lonely mountaintop. I need to get Valiant flying again, find the Water

of Life and fix the house, so that we can get back to her as quickly as possible. Then get home to Benjamin's father too.

I reach out to the curve of the mortar's bowl, and my fingertips prickle before they touch the dark wood. Electricity sparks between us. Valiant shifts – a small but definite movement – as if waking with a start. A fresh smile bursts across my face.

"Hello, Valiant. I'm Marinka." I press my palm to the mortar's smooth surface. The wood is warm, thrumming with life. A jumble of emotions rushes into me, so intensely I pull my hand away. "Oh!" I gasp, overwhelmed by everything Valiant is feeling and the way those feelings flooded into me.

Touching Valiant felt something like when I experience the lives of the dead during a guiding – all their memories and emotions swirling into me. But this was much more powerful. My hands are trembling, my heart racing.

This must be part of the bond that forms between a Yaga and their mortar and pestle. I take a deep breath, brace myself for it to happen again, then wrap my arms around the mortar's bowl in a huge hug so that I can lift it upright.

"You've been stuck in here a long time, haven't you?" I murmur softly as I sift through all the emotions cascading from the bowl, trying to make sense of them. "Trapped, alone, longing to fly free." I think of all the hours I spent staring at the world beyond the bone fence, back when I was forbidden to go past it or talk to the living. All that loneliness and frustration storming in the cage of my ribs. Valiant has been feeling something like that *for centuries*.

"I'm going to get you out of this store and we're going to fly over the forest, to the garden with the Water of Life." As I struggle to lift the heavy mortar higher, it becomes lighter – as if it knows it is about to escape and is propelling itself upwards. A pale shaft of sunlight slopes in and falls on Valiant, illuminating flecks of gold in the dark wood.

A thrill shudders through the bowl and suddenly Valiant slips from my arms, zooms up through the door towards the treetops, then stops and hovers in mid-air for a moment, before spinning downwards and crashing to the ground – somewhere out of my sight – with a cracking sound that makes me wince.

I scramble upwards after Valiant. Benjamin reaches down to help me, then we slip and slide off the house and race across the clearing to where the mortar is lying on its side, motionless. Jack glides down from the eaves and lands on a nearby branch, where he continues to watch us disapprovingly.

“Is it all right?” Benjamin asks as we crouch beside Valiant.

I run my hands over the smooth wood, checking for splits or cracks, and Valiant quivers back to life. I breathe a sigh of relief, then drag the pestle, which had fallen out of the mortar, back into the bowl and heave them both upright. Valiant thrums faster and does a couple of small hops.

“I know you’re excited,” I say gently, “but you need to slow down so you don’t fall again.”

Valiant hops higher, then tilts its bowl towards me in an invitation.

Jack flutters over, lands on my shoulder and tugs my earlobe with his beak. “I understand you’re worried, but we’ll be fine, Jack.” I nudge his beak away, then stroke his neck reassuringly.

Benjamin puts a hand on my arm. “Marinka, I’m not sure about this either. I mean, it just crashed—”

“Valiant only crashed because there wasn’t anyone in the mortar to control it or give it the energy it needs to fly. But once we’re inside the bowl, I’ll be able to steer it with both the pestle and my thoughts. I can do this, Benjamin! I know it!” I nod towards the house, broken and crumpled on the forest floor. All the front shutters are now shaking in the winds from The Gate. “We have to do it, for the house and the whole of the land of the living.”

I turn back to Valiant and put my hands on the curve of the bowl. “Do you know the way to the garden with the Water of Life?” I ask. “The house needs – we *all* need – some desperately.”

Valiant warms beneath my fingers and a memory flashes through my mind of flying over the forest towards a huge garden. “You do know! How far away is it?” Before I’ve even finished asking the question, the answer appears in my thoughts.

“The garden isn’t far!” I turn to Benjamin and smile. “We might even get there and back before the house wakes. Come on!” I step through the cobwebs into the mortar.

The air inside is so warm it feels like stepping into a hot bath. I smile as I lift my other foot into the bowl and let my weight sink down. I feel held,

supported and safe. And finally not cold any more!

I shuffle to one side and hold my hand out to Benjamin. “Ready?”

Benjamin swallows hard, glances up at the house, then back to me. “Honestly, I’m terrified, Marinka. But you’re right – we have to get the Water of Life to close The Gate and save the house. And it feels like you have enough courage for both of us.” Benjamin takes my hand and steps into the bowl beside me.

Valiant surges with energy, waiting to be directed. I put my hands on the pestle between me and Benjamin, and it reverberates beneath my touch.

Jack takes off from my shoulder, cawing loudly. I watch him rise into the sky and think how I want to follow him. My hands, holding the pestle, lift upwards to echo my thoughts, but I can’t feel the weight of the heavy wood. Everything feels so light. The trees seem to fall away and a sudden dizziness makes me reel. Then I realize it’s not the trees that are moving – it’s Valiant, rising steadily upwards.

“We’re flying!” I shout. “We’re really flying!”

Benjamin nods nervously and grips the side of the mortar tight.

I lift the pestle higher, Valiant rises faster, and a laugh bursts from my mouth. Then I glimpse the house below and my heart aches for it. Valiant stops abruptly, hovering in the air.

I don’t want to leave the house here, all alone. But it’s the only way to save it, and I remind myself that we could be back before it wakes.

“We’ll return soon with the Water of Life and it will fix everything,” I whisper. Then I look up again, and once more Valiant accelerates towards the canopy.

Green blurs past my eyes. Thin branches spiked with pine needles brush over me, their sharp, fresh scent filling my nose. Then we crash up and out of the trees, into a pale blue sky. Sunshine bathes my face and I smile.

The sun is hovering over the forest in the east, illuminating a glittering green path that beckons me. I feel in my heart that the garden with the Water of Life is in that direction. “Is that the way, Valiant?” I ask, wanting to be sure.

Valiant spins around slowly, revealing forest in every direction, as far as I can see. But, as I look closely, a few other features emerge from the expanse of green. A mountain to the north, with shining ice on its peak, and a river to the south, with a village on its bank.

Then a small clearing catches my eye. It's not far away – if my house hadn't tripped and fallen, it would have reached it in twenty or thirty paces of its chicken feet. In the centre of the clearing is a small wooden cabin that looks familiar. I peer closer. It *feels* familiar too – somehow it feels like home. But that doesn't make sense. The house with chicken legs is my home.

"Are you all right?" Benjamin asks.

“Yes, it’s just that cabin looks…” Valiant wobbles, then drifts towards the clearing. I pull back on the pestle. “No, we can’t go there. It will be the home of a living person.” My gaze is fixed on the cabin though and curiosity about why it feels familiar is still tingling inside me. Valiant moves faster towards the clearing.

“No!” I shout, panic rising inside me now. “We need to go to the garden with—” My words get whipped away as Valiant surges downwards in a chaotic path.

Benjamin screams. I grip the pestle tight and try to steer the mortar back up. But no matter what I do, Valiant keeps on plummeting down towards the cabin in the clearing, instead of following the glittering green path towards the Water of Life.

The Cabin in the Clearing

"Stop!" I shout desperately. I pull the pestle towards me, push it away from me, lift it, turn it, wiggle it, but nothing changes. Valiant flies completely out of control, dipping up and down and tilting one way then the other, as it surges towards the cabin in the clearing.

Benjamin is still screaming and Jack flaps alongside us screeching, which makes me panic even more. *Why is Valiant doing this?*

Valiant plummets faster, spinning as it falls. I drop the pestle, grip the sides of the bowl and close my eyes against the sickening dizziness and the awful feeling that we're about to crash into trees or, worse, the ground.

Branches smack my head. Twigs scratch my cheek. We speed downwards and I brace for impact…just as we bump onto hard earth. I'm jolted, but not as badly as I thought I would be.

Benjamin falls silent.

"Are you all right?" I ask, peeping an eye open. Benjamin is wide-eyed with shock, but he gives me a small nod, so I glance around.

Valiant has landed in the clearing, not far from the wooden cabin. "Why —" Before I can ask my question, Valiant tips me and Benjamin out into a crumpled heap, then rushes away, dragging itself across the ground towards the nearest trees.

"Valiant! Wait!" I scramble to my feet, brushing twigs and pine needles from my clothes. I'm about to stomp after Valiant when someone clears their throat behind us. I stop still and stifle a groan. We don't have time to talk to a living person – we have to get to the garden with the Water of Life

– but I know we should say something, seeing as we've landed right outside their home.

I turn to see a man standing by a woodpile with an axe in his hand. He's old and wrinkled, with scruffy grey hair and a tangled grey beard. He stares at me and Benjamin, his grey eyes round with surprise, but when our gazes meet, he gives us a small, welcoming nod.

Benjamin wobbles onto his feet and opens his mouth to say something, but no words come out. I think he's still in shock.

Jack flutters down onto my shoulder and eyes the man suspiciously. But to me, the man looks familiar – like the cabin – and I get the comforting feeling that somehow I know he is kind and good.

"Umm…" The man puts his axe down on the woodpile and takes a shuffling step forward. "Hello?" He says the word like a question, like he isn't quite sure if Benjamin, Jack and I are real or not. I realize we must have given him a fright, flying and crashing into his clearing in a giant mortar and pestle.

"Sorry." I pull a twig out of my curls. "We didn't mean to land here." I glance over to Valiant, who is now attempting to hide behind a young birch – although its bowl is at least three times wider than the slim trunk. I roll my eyes at Valiant, then turn back to the man and smile.

I've learned, when trying to explain my house to the living, that generally the best thing to do in situations like this is to avoid explaining anything at all and move conversations on as quickly as possible instead. "We were trying to get to a garden with a well that we've heard isn't far from here, in the east. Do you know of it?"

The man scratches his beard thoughtfully. "I have heard of one." He nods slowly. "My wife is…was…I mean…" The man's breath catches in his throat and he pauses for a moment. "My wife was a storyteller," he continues. "She used to tell a tale about a garden with a well. But I never thought about it being a real place, and I've certainly never been there. Sorry I can't be more help…" He raises his bushy grey eyebrows in a question.

"Marinka." I smile again. "And this is Benjamin."

Benjamin manages to give a small, shy wave.

"And this is Jack." I reach up to stroke the soft feathers on his chest.

"I'm pleased to meet you all. My name is Kolya." The old man bows his head slightly and in that moment I know exactly why he, and this place, are

familiar. I know them from the memories of the woman I guided to the stars last night.

“I’ve met your wife, Anna!” I blurt out excitedly, then remember that Kolya will be mourning her. “I am sorry for your loss,” I add more gently. “Anna was such a wonderful storyteller. Her tales meant so much to so many.”

“Yes, yes they did.” Kolya nods. He wipes his eyes with the back of his hand and glances over to Valiant, who is trying – and failing – to hide. “That looks like something from one of her tales. If I remember right, Anna used to tell a story about a witch who flew in one.” Kolya blushes. “Not that I think you’re witches…I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to offend you.”

“There’s nothing wrong with being a witch.” I shrug. “But we’re not,” I add quickly, in case Kolya is scared of witches, the way some of the living are. “We are in a hurry though.” I look over to the mortar and bite my lip as I think about flying in it again. I hope I can control it better this time. “Sorry again, Kolya, for disturbing you.” I grab Benjamin’s hand and pull him towards Valiant, but as we draw closer the mortar hops away from us, deeper into the forest.

“Valiant! Where are you going? Come back!” I try to speak calmly, but I know I sound cross. I’m impatient to leave and confused by all of this. Why would Valiant bring us here – to the home of someone I guided last night? And why is it hopping away from us now?

Jack flutters off my shoulder as I stoop under a low branch to get closer to Valiant. But Valiant only shuffles further away again, almost burying itself in a thorny shrub. I groan in frustration.

“Marinka?” Kolya calls from behind me. “I don’t know if this will help, but my wife, Anna, in her story about the witch, she said a little about how the witch controlled the flying…umm—”

“Mortar.” I turn back to Kolya, willing to hear anything that might help.

“Anna said the witch steered the mortar with her heart.” Kolya blushes again.

For a moment I’m reminded of Yaga Tatyana and her advice about listening to my heart, but I try to push the thought away before I feel any more guilt about leaving her behind. I make a quick wish that Yaga Tatyana is safe and that we can get back to her soon, then I nod to Kolya. “What Anna said sounds right. Mortars form a bond with whoever flies in them, which connects their thoughts and feelings. So this one should have flown

where I wanted it to go – which was the garden, not here. Perhaps something is wrong with it? It is very old."

Valiant stops still. Somehow, even without eyes, the mortar manages to give the impression that it is glaring at me.

"I don't know about you, but sometimes my thoughts and feelings are a big jumble inside," Kolya says gently. "I couldn't help but notice you flying in, and the mortar looked somewhat disorientated. Could it be that the mortar got confused by what you were thinking and feeling?"

"I was trying my best," I grumble defensively. But I remember how, just before Valiant flew out of control, I was looking at Kolya's home and wondering why it felt familiar. "You're right though," I admit with a sigh. "I probably did confuse Valiant." I glance over to the mortar apologetically. "And I guess that's why it's trying to avoid me now."

"You also said something might be wrong with it," Benjamin says quietly, and my skin burns hot with shame.

"I'll get some refreshments. Give you all a chance to talk." Kolya walks back towards his home and I turn to Valiant again.

"I'm sorry, Valiant," I say. "There's nothing wrong with you and I shouldn't have suggested there was. It was me, getting distracted, that made us crash here. I should have focused better."

Valiant gives me a small nod of acknowledgement, but remains half hidden in the thorny shrub.

"I understand you might not want to try flying with us again," I say. "But the house needs us. The whole of the land of the living does! The Gate expanding inside the house threatens everything, and the Water of Life is our only hope. And you, Valiant, are our only hope of getting some. So, please, help us."

Valiant stretches a little taller, then glides towards us with a proud and benevolent air.

"Thank you, Valiant. I promise I'll focus this time and we'll go straight to the garden."

I hear Kolya step out of his home and turn to see him carrying a tray with three steaming mugs and a couple of food storage tins towards a long wooden bench.

Benjamin's stomach rumbles loudly. "Do you think we have time for a quick breakfast?" he asks hopefully.

“As long as we’re quick.” I nod. I’m starving too and have no idea when our next chance to eat will be. “Is that all right with you, Valiant?” I ask, and Valiant nods in reply before following Benjamin and me over to the wooden bench.

The bench is beautiful, carved with all kinds of figures and scenes. I sit down beside Benjamin and run my fingertips over the pictures. “This is amazing,” I say, as Kolya places the tray between us. “Did you carve it all yourself?”

Kolya nods. “For Anna. They are all scenes from her stories. She would sit where you are now, with people spread out in front of her on—”

“The story blankets she wove!” I interrupt, remembering Anna’s memories from the guiding.

“That’s right.” Kolya looks at me curiously. “Did you come here to listen to her tales? I feel sure I would remember if you had. You look so much like —”

“Eva?” I smile. “Anna told me that I reminded her of her sister, Eva, when she was young.”

“You do look like Eva, and Eva’s daughter too. Perhaps Anna will be reunited with them now…” Kolya’s eyes well up and I realize that these people – Kolya’s loved ones – have all passed through The Gate.

“I’m sorry, Kolya. I didn’t mean to upset you,” I say.

“It’s all right. I like to remember them, even if it makes me sad that they aren’t here any more. Please, help yourself.” Kolya nods to the tray and I pick up one of the mugs, along with a crunchy *sukhary* biscuit from one of the tins which I dunk into the tea eagerly.

Benjamin and Kolya do the same and we sit in silence for a moment, sipping the hot, sweet tea and nibbling the biscuits. Valiant leans against my leg and I put an arm around it. Jack flaps down to my shoulder and I pass him a chunk of biscuit so he doesn’t get jealous.

“Thanks for this, Kolya.” Benjamin takes a soft, spiced *pryanik* cookie out of the other tin and smiles.

“You can take more biscuits for your journey, if you like.” Kolya glances at Valiant. “I hope you get to the garden safely this time. Do you mind me asking why you’re going there?”

“We heard the well in the garden contains the Water of Life and we need some to help…” I’m about to say my house, but stop myself. Kolya seems

fine with the flying mortar and pestle now, but I'm not sure how he'd feel about a house with chicken legs. "Someone I love," I say instead.

"Ah yes. I remember in Anna's story about the garden there was a well filled with the Water of Life." Kolya nods. "It was protected by strong magic and Marzanna would test anyone who came to ask for the water."

"Marzanna?" I ask.

"Anna always called the garden Marzanna's Garden." Kolya nods again. "Marzanna was a scary witch in the tale. I always thought she represented death somehow, because she guarded the Water of Life and made sure that no one got more than their fair share. If anyone asked for more, she would test them to see if they were worthy."

"Oh." My heart sinks. I have never been very good at tests and, if I'm honest, I can't imagine anyone thinking I'm worthy. Not with all the mistakes that I've made in my life – especially the ones that led to me losing Baba. "How did Marzanna test people?" I ask nervously.

"In the story I remember, Marzanna didn't get a chance." Kolya leans forwards and I see he is enjoying thinking about Anna telling the tale. "The hero snuck into the garden," he says dramatically, "then stole some of the Water of Life!"

"That's not very heroic." I frown.

Kolya laughs. "I don't suppose it is. Marzanna did catch up with him and curse him, if that's any comfort."

"The price for cheating death." I sigh, thinking about how I have cheated death in a way – I'm only alive because the house gave me enough energy to be, and now the house is paying for it by becoming unwell and losing control of The Gate.

"What will you do if you find the garden?" Kolya asks. "How will you get the Water of Life?"

"I'm not sure," I say. "But I won't sneak in and I won't steal." Nervousness rustles through me and I rise to my feet and try to shake it off. Marzanna, if she is in the garden, might be nothing like in the story anyway. She might not test or curse anyone – Baba did say that the living often jumbled up the old tales and got things wrong. "Are you ready?" I ask, looking from Benjamin to Valiant.

Benjamin nods and Valiant does a little hop before leaning towards me.

Kolya wraps the remaining biscuits in the paper that lined the tin, then offers them to us. "Please, take these. And if you get a chance, I'd love it if

you could come back one day and tell me how your adventure went. It would be good to know you returned safely to your loved one."

"We'll try, Kolya." I put the biscuits in my apron pocket. "Thank you again for the tea and biscuits, and all your advice." I hesitate, wondering whether to say something else about Anna – about how much she loved him and how she treasured all her memories of their life together. But looking into Kolya's kind face, I can see that he knows that already.

I take a deep breath and climb into the mortar. Once again, it feels full of energy waiting to be directed. Benjamin thanks Kolya then climbs in beside me. I place my hands on the pestle, close my eyes and focus on my wish to find the Water of Life, to help the house.

Jack's claws squeeze my shoulder as we rise steadily upwards.

"Good luck!" Kolya shouts and I open my eyes. Already we are far above his cabin. I wave a farewell, then look out across the forest to the east. Valiant wobbles a little before picking up speed as it flies over the treetops.

A smile grows on my face. "We're doing it! This time we're flying straight and true!" Jack caws loudly and grips my shoulder tighter. I think he feels nervous, and Benjamin definitely does – he is gripping the edge of the mortar so tight his knuckles have paled.

But the warm wood of the mortar thrums comfortingly around me. "Thank you, Valiant!" I shout and in response the mortar flies faster, until we are zooming eastwards.

I wonder what the garden will be like…then I remember what Kolya said about it being protected by magic, and Marzanna testing anyone who came to ask for the water to see if they were worthy. A frown deepens on my forehead. Everything depends on getting the Water of Life, so I can't fail… but with all the things I've got wrong in the past, how can I possibly prove that I am worthy?

Marzanna's Garden

The sun rises higher as we fly over the forest, but the air, rushing past, has a cold bite to it, and my ears and nose go numb. Thankfully though, the wood of the mortar and pestle is warm, which stops my fingers and toes from freezing.

Jack stays on my shoulder and apart from the occasional shriek – when my thoughts drift and Valiant wobbles a little – he seems more comfortable with its flight. Benjamin, however, is definitely not comfortable. His face has turned a distinctly green colour and his eyes scan desperately for the garden. I still can't quite believe that Benjamin is doing this for me and the house, but I'm full of gratitude that he is.

I feel as impatient to reach the garden as Benjamin looks. Flying in the mortar – now that I have control – is as wonderful as I dreamed it would be, but worry for the house is churning inside me. I wonder how big The Gate has grown now, what else has been pulled inside, and whether the house is awake. Thinking about it waking all alone and broken on the forest floor makes my heart ache.

Finally, when the sun is almost directly overhead, something glints above the trees nearby. Unsure what it is, I peer closer and Valiant slows to let us look.

A geometric pattern of thin lines is catching the light, like a spider's web, but enormous, covering an area of forest that would take hours to walk across. As Valiant drifts closer, I realize the lines are a network of criss-crossing vines that shield the forest beneath it.

The vines look damp and sticky, beaded with sap, and dangling from them are clusters of empty snail shells, poppy-seed heads, and many other types of seed pods and nut casings that I don't recognize. A breeze rattles them softly.

"This must be part of the magic that protects Marzanna's Garden!" I turn to Benjamin. "The garden must be right below us, but if we fly down through the vines, we'll get tangled in them and the rattling of all the shells and seeds will let Marzanna know we've tried to sneak in."

Benjamin looks across the forest, following the web of vines with his gaze. "We should look for a proper entrance."

I nod. "If we have to prove we're worthy of getting the Water of Life, we should try to make a good impression."

Valiant drifts over the vines, towards a place where they end in a long, straight line of foliage.

"Is that a hedge?" Benjamin shields his eyes from the sun to get a clearer view.

"Yes. I think it surrounds the garden. Let's land on the other side of it and look for a way in."

Valiant descends through the canopy into a swell of warm air. At first I think it's warm because we're sheltered from the cold breeze above, but I soon realize that heat is radiating from the hedge, which is enormous. "This must be more of Marzanna's magic." I stare at the hedge in awe. It's as tall as the tallest trees and formed of densely packed shrubs and vines, tangled together in a mass of leaves of every shape and colour.

Jack tilts his head curiously at the hedge, and I glimpse birds and small mammals hiding in and moving through the foliage. A lizard as long as my hand darts along a vine and surprise flashes through me, because it looks like a creature much more suited to warmer climes. The warmth from the magical hedge must allow it to survive here.

Valiant lands gently on the ground. Benjamin climbs out first and collapses against the nearest tree. "I don't think flying agrees with me," he groans.

I climb out next and shake out my dress and limbs. My dress is dry now but crumpled and dirty, and my muscles are stiff from the journey. All the bumps and scrapes I've had since chasing after the house last night are aching too, making me feel tender all over.

“Thank you for getting us here safely,” I say to Valiant as I let go of the pestle. “I don’t know what we would have done without you.”

Valiant rolls with pride.

I look along the hedge, hoping to spot a way in. But it goes on, without a break, as far as I can see. Knowing how big the garden looked from above, I don’t want to set off walking – it might be hours before we find a way in and the house needs us now. Every minute that goes by, The Gate is growing and becoming more dangerous, and the house must be so scared.

I frown, unsure what to do. I try listening to my heart, but it doesn’t give me a clear answer. Then I realize that perhaps being unsure is an answer in a way – a message to take time to consider the different ways forward, and maybe even to ask for help.

I step close to the hedge and peer inside. It’s so dense, I can’t see far into it. “Hello?” I call. But there is no response.

“Marzanna?” I call, louder. “I’m Marinka. Yaga Marinka,” I add, hoping that perhaps being a Yaga in this magical place might help me somehow. “I’m here with my friends Benjamin, Valiant and Jack. We need your help.” My voice cracks on the last word, as it crashes over me how desperate I am. “I need the Water of Life to heal my house with chicken legs. The Gate to the Stars inside it has grown huge and become a danger to the house itself, this whole forest and everything beyond. Please, Marzanna. Can you hear me?”

The leaves of the hedge rustle. I take a step back and watch in amazement as the shrubs and vines shift and untangle, creating a small arched entranceway – just big enough for us to step through.

Warm, humid air from inside the garden flows out and wraps around me. It smells sweet and earthy, of flowers and leaf litter. Benjamin steps close and we peer through the arch into a wonderful place full of colour and texture. There are leaves and blossoms of every shape and shade, some of them fresh and new, others wrinkled and withering. Mushrooms grow from tree stumps. Moss blankets stones. Patches of snow gleam in the shadows, while fruits and flowers shine in sunbeams. It’s like every season exists here all at once. And there are creatures everywhere.

Snakes slide along the ground, overtaking slugs and snails. Birds with bright feathers flit from tree to tree. A badger lumbers past and some deer leap in the distance. There is so much in the garden, I’m not sure where to

look. Jack tilts his head at it all suspiciously and grips my shoulder tighter. But when I glance back to Valiant, it nods encouragingly.

I turn to Benjamin. “Ready?” I ask.

He nods too, but there is only space for one of us to step through at a time. “I’ll be right behind you,” he says.

I turn back to the garden and squeeze through the arched entrance. The hedge rustles as it immediately closes behind me, and I panic as I realize Benjamin is trapped on the other side.

Then, despite the heat in the air, all the warmth drains from my body. I feel like I’ve fallen into a snowdrift. Jack goes limp on my shoulder and I watch in horror as he falls to the ground before I can move my arms to catch him. Then my own consciousness slips away. The floor rises to greet me too, and everything goes black.

MARZANNA

I wake on a cold stone floor, and my thoughts immediately whirl into panic. Benjamin and Valiant are trapped on the other side of the hedge. And Jack went limp and fell to the ground! I look around for him frantically and as soon as I spot him, lying still, not far away, I scoop him into my arms and press him against my chest.

Relief flows through me as I feel the gentle rhythm of his breathing. He's alive, but icily cold. I hold him close, my hands cupped around his body, and am surprised by how small he feels now that he's not flapping his wings and squawking at me.

I hoped my warmth might revive him, but Jack remains asleep. I feel cold too, right through to my bones. I haven't felt this cold for over a year…*not since I was*— I push the thought away, but it only swings back in a different form…*not since before the house gave me energy to be alive.*

I rise to my feet, trying to work out where I am. The garden is all around me, but I am not where I fell. There is no sign of the hedge that parted to let me in here and I'm on an island of stone surrounded by grass and moss.

"Benjamin!" I shout. "Valiant!" But there is no response.

I turn around and my heart beats faster at the sight of a large stone well. *This must be the well containing the Water of Life!* The stone wall surrounding it is carved with pictures of plants, animals, mushrooms, skulls and bones – life and death side by side and linked by swirls that look like flowing water. I take a step towards the well, but stop still as the trees ahead begin to move.

It takes me a moment to realize that it's a woman moving towards me, not the trees. Leafy vines flow from her head and down over her shoulders. They rustle as she moves and small birds chirp within them. Her eyes are a bright, glowing green and her pale skin has a green hue too. Her legs and arms have a light covering of moss, and thin vines spiral around them like jewellery. Delicate mushrooms grow from her feet and her long, root-like toes reach down into the earth.

My eyes widen in wonder. I've never seen anyone who looked like this before – part-forest, part-person. She's beautiful.

"Marinka." The woman smiles, revealing teeth sharp and dark as rose thorns. "*Yaga* Marinka." She puts emphasis on the word Yaga and her smile widens. "I am Marzanna and this –" she looks around proudly – "is my garden."

"Where are Benjamin and Valiant? Why did you separate us?" Jack stirs at the sound of my voice. He lets out a weak caw but doesn't wake.

"They are safe outside the garden, and you can return to them whenever you wish. To protect this place, I only allow one visitor at a time, and you are the one who said you need the Water of Life to heal your house." Marzanna steps closer to the well. "The water has never been given to a Yaga house before."

"Will it work?" I ask quickly, but Marzanna doesn't respond. With a sweeping movement and a rustle of leaves, she steps over the stone wall surrounding the well and descends into it.

I stare after her in shock, until she glances back and nods to me. "Come," she says before she disappears completely and I rush after her.

As I draw close to the well, I see it has steps inside it, spiralling into darkness. Already Marzanna is out of sight. I clamber over the wall and carefully begin the descent, one hand on the wall and the other cradling Jack. The steps are small and spiral tightly down, so I need to concentrate hard not to slip.

I feel light-headed and so cold. As I sink lower into the well, I become dizzier and shiver in the icy air. Darkness engulfs me, fears flutters in my chest and a green glow rises around me. "Marzanna?" I ask, my voice wavering.

"I am here, Yaga Marinka. Only a few more steps."

I take a deep breath and climb down into the glowing light. Here, at the bottom of the well, a huge cavern opens out in all directions, so vast I can't

see the ends of it. Thick tree roots have grown through the stone walls and balanced all along them are oil lamps of different sizes – some as small as my fingernails and others almost as big as my whole body.

“Every creature in my garden has a lamp here.” Marzanna sweeps one of her long arms around the cavern, at what must be hundreds of thousands of lamps. All of them are glass and contain a pale-green liquid that glows like Marzanna’s eyes. Each lamp is lit and the flames flickering on the wicks are also green.

“These lamps contain the Water of Life. If you want some for your house, you must choose a lamp to take some from. The size of the lamp does not matter – you only need a few drops of the water inside.”

My stomach tightens. I swallow hard. “Is this a test?” I ask.

Marzanna laughs and it echoes around the cavern like a song. “Any stories of tests you might have heard aren’t true. I test no one.” Marzanna turns to me and lowers her voice to a snake-like whisper. “You will have to live with your choice though, Yaga Marinka.”

Though quiet, Marzanna’s words land heavily. I carry the weight of so many poor choices already – the ones that led to me losing Baba, and the more recent decision to encourage House to go for a guiding which led to The Gate exploding and putting the whole of the land of the living in danger. How can I live with any more?

I peer at the nearest lamp, which is about the size of my palm. The image of a lizard is etched onto the glass. I shudder as I begin to realize what Marzanna means. “Does this lamp contain the Water of Life belonging to a lizard in your garden?” I look up at Marzanna and she replies with a small nod. “So if I take some, then…” I can’t bring myself to say the words.

“You will be taking some of the lizard’s life.” Marzanna picks up the lamp and looks through the glass. Only a small amount of the pale-green liquid is inside. “This lizard doesn’t have much life left. Perhaps she is old, or ill, or about to be eaten by…” Marzanna glances around and picks up a much larger lamp, almost full of liquid. “This wildcat,” she says and turns back to me. “So would you rather take some life from the lizard who does not have much left, or the wildcat who has plenty?”

“I don’t want to take life from anyone!” I say, too loudly. My voice reverberates around the cavern.

“I am not forcing you to, Yaga Marinka.” Marzanna puts both lamps down calmly. “You chose to come here and are free to leave whenever you

wish.”

I look around the cavern desperately. There must be another way. “I need the Water of Life to save my house.”

“Then you must choose a lamp.” Marzanna takes a step away from me. “Take all the time you need.”

I bite my lip as my gaze drifts over all the lamps. Each one is etched with a creature, small or large. My gaze lingers on a tiny lamp with a picture of a spider on it.

“I suspect your jackdaw friend eats several spiders a day,” Marzanna whispers behind me. “Surely a little of a spider’s life is worth taking to heal your house?”

I frown. “It feels so wrong.”

“Animals eat animals all the time. I imagine you have too. A life for a life. This is no different. In fact, it is kinder. A few drops of the Water of Life from one of these lamps will not kill a creature, but merely shorten its life a little. And a few drops is all you need for your house.”

I look at another small lamp, this one etched with a snail. What Marzanna said makes sense, but I don’t pick up the lamp. Having this kind of power over other creatures’ lives feels like a huge and terrible responsibility. And I don’t want to regret my choice, the way I regret so many mistakes of the past. But I don’t want to leave without some of the Water of Life either… The whole world is in danger and this feels like my one chance to save it. I take a few steps deeper into the cavern, searching for a choice I can live with.

An image of a jackdaw on one of the lamps catches my eye. It looks like Jack – the way his head is tilted and his eyes shining as they stare straight at me. A thought hits me so hard I jump. “That *is* Jack!” I exclaim, spinning round to look at Marzanna. “You said every creature in your garden has a lamp here!”

Marzanna smiles and I realize why Jack and I fell unconscious as we entered this garden and why we feel so cold now. “When we came into your garden, something happened to us, didn’t it? You now have *our* Water of Life here, in our own lamps!”

Marzanna nods. “Your life force separated from your bodies. It will do you no harm, and when you leave all will return as it should.”

“So I have a lamp here too!” I scan the shelves again and spot my own lamp almost immediately. It’s not far from Jack’s and looks different from

every other lamp in the cavern.

My lamp has cracked glass, patched over with a small curve of wood the same colour and texture as the wood of my house. I lift the lamp carefully and see my own image etched onto the glass; my curly hair and sharp eyes that always look a little angry and sad.

Inside the lamp, swirling in the pale-green liquid, are thin ribbons of black shining with stars, like the darkness in The Gate – the same darkness that the house gets its energy from and that it gave to me, to give me life.

"Your life force is quite unique, Yaga Marinka," Marzanna says.

I nod. "I died when I was a baby. But I wouldn't pass through The Gate, so I existed in my house, on the threshold of life and death, until last year – when my house gave me enough energy to be alive for real." I hold my lamp out to Marzanna. "This is the lamp I choose. I want to take some drops from this one."

"Are you sure?" Marzanna opens her hand and I place my lamp onto it.

"Yes. I've never been as sure of anything before," I say truthfully. I know in my heart I won't regret this decision. The house gave me life and now is my chance to give some back.

"Once I have poured some of the water out, I can't return it to your lamp, Yaga Marinka." A small vial appears in Marzanna's other hand.

I nod and Marzanna tilts my lamp over the vial.

"How many drops?" she asks.

I think for a moment. "Three," I say finally. "One to heal the house's leg. One to fix The Gate. And one for luck."

Marzanna lets three small drops fall into the vial, places my lamp back on the twisted root shelf, then corks the vial and passes it to me. "It was nice to meet you, Yaga Marinka. I hope this does as you wish."

I take the vial and am about to thank Marzanna when, in the blink of an eye, she disappears. I squint at a sudden brightness and realize that Jack and I have left the cavern and are back where we first entered the garden. I feel warm again and Jack is wriggling back to consciousness. He stretches his wings and scrambles up onto my shoulder sleepily.

The hedge rustles open, revealing Benjamin and Valiant, who rush towards us eagerly.

"Marinka! Are you all right? I've been so worried!" Benjamin cries.

"I'm fine, and look – I have it!" I hold up the tiny vial of the Water of Life before tucking it carefully into my apron pocket. I put my hand on the

warm wood of the mortar and smile. “Let’s go and heal the house!”

The Water of Life

The sun is setting, throwing amber light over the treetops, when I finally spot the giant stone marker near where the house fell. Excitement rushes through me and Valiant speeds towards the huge mossy stone, then slows as we descend into the canopy.

The forest brims with cold, grey shadows. Goosebumps rise on my flesh as I strain my eyes to see the outline of the house. It looks so forlorn, all my excitement becomes smothered by worry. The house appears to be sinking into the pine-needled earth. There is no breath from the crumpled chimney, no movement in the walls, and the house's wood looks dull, dry and covered with a web of cracks and splinters.

Valiant bumps gently down and Benjamin clambers out first, looking a little green again. I climb out next and rush towards the house. Jack flies ahead, lands on a corner of the roof and nuzzles his head against it, cawing softly.

"Be careful, Jack!" I shout, stopping beside the house's broken leg. I can't see The Gate through the shuttered, downturned windows, but I can feel the pull of cold, damp air tugging me towards it.

"House!" I shout, slipping the glass vial from my apron pocket with trembling fingers. "I have the Water of Life! This will heal you – your leg, The Gate. Everything is going to be fine now."

The house doesn't show any sign of hearing me, but I tell myself that's fine. This will work. *It must work.* I turn to the broken leg. The long, deep crack in the wood seems a good place to put a drop of the Water of Life, so I clamber up and find where the split is deepest. I carefully slide the cork

from the vial and pour one small drop of the pale green, glowing liquid onto the splintered, broken wood, cork the bottle again, then hold my breath.

Benjamin looks on nervously.

The house stirs and lifts its windows higher. Hope rushes through me. “House? Can you feel that? Is it helping?”

The leg creaks and groans as it shifts. I slide off it, down to the ground, and land near Benjamin. A smile grows on my face as the leg slowly straightens. The wood on either side of the crack presses together with a crunch and the crack disappears.

“It’s working!” Benjamin smiles.

The whole house shines brighter and wriggles as if preparing to stand. We back away as the slumped eaves lift and curve up to the sky and the shuttered windows turn out towards the forest. The porch unfurls with a beautiful sigh, then the house swings upwards, back onto its feet.

I clap my hands with joy, ignoring the ache in my wrist, as the house rises to its full height. The porch lifts above the treetops and the feathers that flow from beneath it glisten, iridescent in the last of the evening sun. “There you are, House.” I beam.

The house bends and stretches like it’s doing morning exercises, and Jack’s excited cawing drifts down from the roof.

“House! Pick us up!” I shout. “Let’s see what is happening with The Gate now!”

The house stops stretching, leans down to look at me and its roof curves into a smile. It feels like such a long time since the house smiled at me, a whirl of emotions rushes through my chest – relief, happiness, gratitude.

“I love you, House,” I whisper.

A vine falls from the eaves and swings over to me. It’s not one of the purple stinging ones, but green and smooth as a new shoot. The vine reaches up to stroke my cheek, and I know the house is saying that it loves me too.

“Let’s see The Gate,” I say again. “If it’s still expanding, I can fix it with another drop of the Water of Life.”

Benjamin steps beside me as the house lifts a foot. Its long, clawed toes wrap around us both, squashing us together. Then the house scoops us up onto the side of the wrap-around porch – away from the front windows – and the floor bends to cradle our landing.

We take a few steps along the porch and peer around the corner, towards the front of the house. One of the windows has closed shutters and the other is blocked by the branches we wove together. Wind gusts loudly behind them both.

“If we can get close enough to the first window, covered with the woven branches, and drip a drop of the Water of Life inside, it will get sucked into The Gate,” I say. “I’m sure that will fix it.”

“But how can we get close enough safely?” Benjamin asks. “The wind is so strong.”

Thick green vines fall from the eaves in response and wrap tightly around our waists.

“The house will keep us safe, come on.” I duck low and lead the way along the porch, feeling the pull of The Gate grow stronger with each step.

More vines fall and wrap around us, holding us tight as we edge closer. We reach the makeshift shutter and crouch below it. Cold winds rush through the gaps between the branches, creating eddies that whip our hair across our faces. The pull of The Gate is so powerful, if it wasn’t for the vines, we’d be crashing through the window.

Benjamin tries to shield me from the wind as I fumble with the vial in my hands. I manage to slide the cork off, but as I lift it, a strong gust tugs the vial from my fingers and through one of the gaps between the branches.

“No!” Panic flies through me, but is quickly followed by a surge of hope. “The vial is open, so the Water of Life should still reach The Gate!” I shout over the wind.

I hold my breath as the vial spins towards the starry blackness. A drop of the Water of Life flies out of the vial and touches the darkness. I gasp as both the drop and the vial stop in mid-air, as if time has frozen. A strange silence swells and I realize The Gate has stopped pulling everything towards it. The cold, damp winds are gone.

“Has it worked?” Benjamin whispers hopefully.

“I think so.” A smile tugs at my lips.

But then a rumble sounds, loud like thunder, and dread crashes over me. Another rumble reverberates, followed by a bang that makes us duck and cover our ears. Then The Gate explodes outwards again, like it did during the guiding.

The vial and the drop of the Water of Life are flung away from The Gate, back through the gap between the branches and past my ear. I hear the glass

vial smash onto branches below and my heart plummets.

I grip Benjamin's arm with one hand and the windowsill with the other, trying to hold on as winds push us away from the house. More vines fall and wrap around us. Through the makeshift shutter I see the darkness of The Gate washing towards us in waves.

"It didn't work!" I cry in despair.

The winds suddenly change direction, pulling us towards The Gate again, and the vines fight to tug us away. We slide backwards along the porch as gusts roar around us. I glimpse the woven branches of the makeshift shutter get pulled through the window – and into The Gate beyond. Then the front wall of the house curves inwards, as if it too is being sucked into The Gate.

The last thing I see as we round the corner of the house is dozens of vines falling from the eaves and weaving over the open window and wall, trying to make a shield against the pull of The Gate.

The vines around me and Benjamin drag us along the side porch, then round to the back porch, where we are safe from The Gate – for now – and where the roar of the wind is quieter. We collapse against the back wall, and Jack flops down from the roof onto my shoulder.

"Oh, House!" I put my hands on the vines wrapped around me. "I've made everything worse! The Water of Life didn't close The Gate, and now it's growing even faster than before!" I look from the vines to Jack and Benjamin in despair. "I don't know how to stop this! The Gate is going to pull the house inside and then…" I look out at the forest, tears stinging my eyes.

The house suddenly swells with a great breath and lifts a foot. It sweeps Valiant onto the porch beside us, secures it with vines, then takes a long, lurching step over the trees, quickly followed by another. It picks up pace rapidly until it is running through the forest, east again, in the direction it was heading before it fell.

"Where is the house going?" Benjamin asks, his eyes wide with fright from the explosion of The Gate.

I wipe away my tears with the back of my hand and look up at the eaves. The house is sprinting now, rolling with a steady rhythm as its feet urgently pound the ground below. "Do you have a plan to fix The Gate?" I ask.

The eaves nod and my heart lifts. "The house has a plan!" I exclaim to Benjamin with relief, but then my brow furrows as I struggle to understand what else the house is trying to tell me. The vines around me thrum with the

same conviction that I felt when it was crossing the ocean last night. I realize that the house is trying to reach the place it first set out running to. “The house was never trying to reach the Water of Life!” I say in surprise. “It’s looking for something else.”

“Something that can close The Gate?” Benjamin asks hopefully.

“Yes. But I’m not sure what.” I look up at the eaves again, desperately trying to think where it could be going.

“You can figure this out, Marinka.” Benjamin puts his hand on my arm reassuringly. “You know the house better than anyone.”

I remember Yaga Tatyana saying the same thing to me not long ago, and her and Benjamin’s faith in me encourages me on. “Can you try to tell me somehow, House?” I ask. “Please?”

The vines lift me from the floor towards the roof, and I sense that the house wants to show me something that it hopes will explain. I glance down to Benjamin. “I’ll be back in a moment.”

Jack jumps off my shoulder and glides down onto Benjamin’s while I look back up. For a moment I think the house is going to lift me all the way onto its roof, but it stops short of the mossy tiles and holds me level with the eaves. I peer through the dusky light to a small hatch tucked beneath them.

“This wasn’t here before. Did you grow it for me?”

The hatch opens in an invitation and the vines lift me closer. I lean towards the dark space tentatively. I’ve never been in the house’s attic.

“Do you want me to climb inside?” I ask.

The eaves nod and the vines draw me even closer. My skin tingles as I reach out to the small entrance. I glance down to Benjamin, Jack and Valiant once more. They all look so exhausted, worried and scared – exactly how I feel too.

I hope whatever is in the attic will explain how the house plans to fix The Gate, and that we can do it soon, so we can all finally return safe to Yaga Tatyana and Benjamin’s father.

The Attic

I clamber into the house's attic. It's a small, dark space, just big enough for me to sit cross-legged. The air inside is warm and smells of dust and the house's wood – a cosy, familiar smell, full of spices from Baba's cooking and stardust from The Gate. The vines uncurl from around me, my weight settles onto the floor, and I feel the steady rhythm of the house running.

As I wait for my eyes to adjust to the darkness, tiny flashes appear like fireflies signalling each other at dusk. I stare at the closest one, a handsbreadth away. It grows larger, to about the size of a marble. Silhouettes shift inside it.

Mesmerized, I lift a finger to the glowing orb. The moment I touch it, images rush into my mind with a fizzing sensation that reminds me of some tiny sweets Benjamin once gave me that popped on my tongue.

I see dark earth, roots and something of a lighter colour, twitching – *a tiny chicken foot!*

"These are your memories!" I exclaim, glancing round at all the flashing lights in wonder. There must be hundreds of thousands of them, millions perhaps.

A vine curls over my hand and nudges it back towards the glowing orb. Once again, a fizzing sensation rushes through me as I touch it, and images flow into my thoughts. Somehow, I know this is the house's earliest memory and that it is from hundreds of years ago.

I think how little I know of the house's age and origin. I have wondered, of course, but never got round to asking. The bees buzz in my chest. I have

always been so focused on my own thoughts and problems. I wish I'd paid more attention to those I love – the house and Baba.

I lean back against the attic's warm, soft walls and focus on the memory, feeling grateful that the house is sharing it with me now, and hoping that it will explain where the house is running to.

In the memory, everything is dark, warm and safe. The house is small, no bigger than my palm. It is underground, in soft loamy earth, growing from the wandering root of an enchanted tree. I can feel a connection between the house and the root at the house's back. It surges with life.

The house wriggles. It sees one of its own tiny, clawed feet. The earth shifts and a breath of wind reaches down to the house. And in that moment, the house longs to run free. It wriggles more. The connection to the root breaks with a tiny snap and the house clambers up and out of the ground.

The air is cold compared with the warm earth and the house shivers. It's overwhelmed by a feeling of being tiny and alone in this vast, unknown space. But then a bird flies overhead and with a thrilling burst of wonder, the house begins to run. It chases after the bird, jumping over twigs and leaves that are bigger than it.

Wind sings through the trees and birds call in the canopy. The soft ground yields beneath the house's feet and familiar earthy scents rise and mix with sharp, unknown ones that make the house's wood tingle with delight.

The bird disappears from sight, but then the house spots a squirrel climbing a nearby tree. The house runs after it, up the tree trunk and along a branch. The squirrel leaps onto another tree and the house follows. But it can't jump as far and ends up falling, down to the ground with a bump.

I flinch at the shock and pain the house feels. It lies still, stunned, and when it finally rises to its feet, it wobbles so much it almost falls over again. One of its legs is injured, the wood cracked and aching.

"Oh, House!" I murmur as the glowing memory drifts away from my finger. "That was the same leg you hurt today! What did you do?" I ask, thinking how there was no one there to help it.

More of the flashing lights draw close, crowding around me. One by one, I touch the memories, let them flow into me, and learn about the house's life.

The house limps through the forest until a rabbit lets it take shelter in her burrow. She licks the house's wound and lets it snuggle up with her four

kits, whose soft fur smells of roots and home.

Once the house heals, it leaves the burrow and runs along trails chasing deer, leaping after them over fallen branches. The house learns to swim with a family of ducks in a forest pool that is green with the reflections of the surrounding trees.

The next time it sees a squirrel, it is more cautious. The house watches the squirrel climb and carefully follows it, using its growing claws to grip the furrowed bark. And when the squirrel leaps, this time the house does not follow.

A jackdaw in a tree cavity lets the house share her nest for a while, and the house helps warm her eggs. But when they hatch, there isn't enough room for the house, so the house strokes the chicks goodbye and returns to the ground. This memory makes me smile. Jack and the house have always been close, but I never imagined the house might have been friends with other jackdaws.

Seasons change, years flow by. The house runs away from clouds of mosquitoes that swell in summer. It kicks up leaves in autumn and enjoys watching mushrooms and toadstools grow. Winters are difficult. The house is often cold and alone. Sometimes it finds animals that let it share their burrows: rabbits, foxes and badgers. But after a few years the house is too big for this. One winter it shares a den with a hibernating bear, but the following year the den is empty.

The house loves the forest, but I feel loneliness growing within its walls. I recognize its empty ache and it makes my own heart sore with understanding. The house wanders to the edge of the forest in search of something – although it isn't sure what.

There are people living in and around the forest edge. They are mostly too noisy and busy for the house's comfort, but the house is curious and sometimes watches them from the shadows beneath the trees.

I recognize this feeling too. I have always been curious about people. But, even being amongst them this year, I have often felt like I am watching from the shadows. And apart from Benjamin and his father, I rarely feel comfortable with the living. Perhaps because, like Benjamin said, in The Land of Lakes I must hide a part of who I am.

The house is drawn to a particular cabin, in a quiet area of the forest. It looks similar to Kolya's cabin in many ways, but there are some small differences and I feel this memory is hundreds of years old. I wonder if the

cabin is in the same clearing as Kolya's cabin though – the arrangement of trees is so familiar. *Could the forest we are running through now be the same one that the house grew up in?*

A family lives in the cabin – a couple with a young daughter. She looks about seven years old and I feel this is about the same age as the house in the memory. They are about the same height too. When the girl finds the house hiding behind trees near her home, her eyes are level with the house's eaves.

The girl isn't scared. She loves the house from the moment they meet and they become the best of friends. They play games together: hide-and-seek, tag, and imaginative games like the ones I used to play with the house, where it would grow tiny walking trees and dancing flowers on its porch. They even play the game I thought I invented – Yaga's Footsteps – in which I would try to sneak up on the house before it heard me and chased me away.

I'm happy the house found a friend, but a strange feeling settles over me too. The girl in the memory looks a little like me – she has red hair and green eyes that are quick to flash with impatience. I can't help but wonder if the house allowed me to stay when I refused to pass through The Gate because I reminded the house of its first friend. And I can't help but think about Kolya too – how his cabin might be in the same place this cabin was hundreds of years ago, and how his sister-in-law Eva also looked like me. I feel like I'm missing a puzzle piece that connects all these things together and am about to ask the house when another glowing memory practically jumps into my palm.

This memory is from years later. Both the girl and the house are about fourteen years old now. The house is huge – almost fully grown – but seems so different from the house I know. It looks so young! Its walls are straighter, its angles sharper, its wood lighter and brighter. There is none of the worn and comfy crookedness that, for me, has always been a part of the house.

The house *feels* different too – easily distracted, fidgety… I realize the house is restless, once again longing for something, but unsure what. Confusion twists a frown onto the house's eaves. It loves living near its friend and doesn't want to leave her. But the nest the house sleeps in beside the girl's cabin feels too small, and the house's dreams are filled with running and the desire to see what lies beyond the forest.

I’m both startled and comforted by how some of this resonates with what I’ve been feeling in The Land of Lakes – unsettled and like something is missing from my life. Perhaps it’s not so unusual to love people and places, but still long for something more.

The house’s friend seems to understand and she climbs onto the house’s porch one day to say goodbye. My heart aches as the house and the girl hug. Tears flow from the girl’s eyes and the house’s eaves sag with sadness. Then vines curl around the girl and tenderly stroke her cheek as they lift her down to the ground.

The house pauses and looks from the girl to her cabin, and then to the outgrown nest beside it. It hurts to leave, but the house knows it must follow its heart. So it takes a deep breath through its chimney and begins to run.

Excitement rushes through me as the house gallops out of the forest and over grasslands, deserts, sandy beaches, rocky shores and slippery glaciers. It doesn’t know where it’s going but runs for pure joy, feeling the world spin beneath its feet as it searches for whatever might make it feel fulfilled.

The house soon finds something that feels like the purpose of its journey. In a faraway forest, not too different from the one it left, it finds another house with chicken legs. This house’s wood is worn smooth by centuries and its roof has a crooked smile.

Inside lives a Yaga so old she must be an Ancient Elder, over one thousand years old and many more. Her bright eyes are sunk deep in valleys of wrinkles, her teeth are worn to snug stubs, and her limbs are as gnarled and twisted as protective hawthorn branches.

A younger Yaga also lives in the house. I recognize her instantly, even though she is hundreds of years younger than when I knew her. It’s Baba, my grandmother.

My heart swells as I watch Baba and the house become friends. Baba can’t be much older than me now – thirteen or fourteen years old. She looks shy and nervous. I can’t grasp Baba’s history from the house’s memories, but I sense she didn’t always live with the Ancient Elder and was relieved when she found a kind, loving home there.

As Baba spends time with the house, she grows in confidence. Her eyes shine with love and hope for a future she hadn’t ever imagined. The Ancient Elder and her home teach Baba and the house about being Yaga. The house grows furniture for Baba and the Ancient Elder gives her blankets and

tablecloths, bowls and spoons, and ceremonial bones that have been passed down for generations.

Then, one day, when the wind rises and blows from the east, carrying the scents of lilac, meadowsweet and baby's breath, the house – with Baba inside it – begins to run again. The house's memory blurs as they run east. The sky becomes green and the clouds blue. Rainbows of water droplets spray up from the house's feet as it runs over the surface of a pink ocean. I struggle to make sense of these landscapes. But then the house reaches a small island with a stone house on it and everything swings back into focus.

An old man steps out. "Greetings, young Yaga house." He smiles. "I am Gate Carver Antek. I assume you are here to ask for a Gate?"

I jump up without thinking and bang my head on the roof. "House!" I exclaim, my whole body tingling with hope. I suddenly know why the house shared these memories with me and I know where it's running to now. "You're running to this Gate Carver, aren't you? Gate Carver Antek? If he created The Gate inside you, then he can fix it!"

A vine wraps around my shoulders in a tender hug. It's not the reaction I expected. I sense that I'm right – that the house is running to Gate Carver Antek – but the vine is trembling with an ominous feeling that I don't understand, along with uncertainty and sadness.

I try to focus on the positives: that the house is running again, and we are heading to someone who will be able to help. But I can't shake the thought that there is something the house is not telling me, and the ominous feeling only swells, along with the roar of the winds from The Gate that are getting louder with each passing moment.

The Gate Carver's Island

The vine hugging my shoulders slides down to my waist, then lifts me out of the attic space. The hatch closes and its door merges into the wood around it until there is no sign it was ever there.

The sun has fully set and a thick darkness has fallen, only broken by the faint glow of starlight. I frown at the roar of the wind rushing into The Gate on the other side of the house. It's louder than the thump of the house's chicken feet as it runs through the night. I hope we reach Gate Carver Antek soon, and that he can close The Gate before it grows any larger.

The vine lowers me down to the porch and places me beside Benjamin, who is leaning against Valiant with Jack asleep on his lap. Benjamin's sketchbook is on his knee, open to an unfinished drawing of us flying over the forest in Valiant. But it's too dark to draw now and Benjamin is only fiddling with his pencil nervously.

"The house shared some memories with me," I explain. "Someone called Gate Carver Antek created The Gate, and the house is running to find him now."

"That's brilliant." Benjamin's eyes flash with hope. "I never imagined The Gate was created by someone. Gate Carver Antek should know what to do."

I nod, deciding not to mention the strange, uncertain feelings that I sense in the house.

"I wonder how Gate Carver Antek learned to carve Gates," Benjamin says curiously. "How far away is he?"

I rise to my feet, place my hands on the back porch's balustrade and feel the house's nervous anticipation growing. "I think we'll be there soon," I say, trying to calm my fears as I stare out at the forest.

Benjamin nods and I sense him thinking about his father again. I open my mouth, but I'm not sure what to say to comfort him. Trees swing past, black in the night. Above, a few bright stars shine through misty clouds and I wonder if Yaga Tatyana and Benjamin's father are looking at the same stars right now. They must be so worried about us. So much has happened since the house ran away last night, and now another night is drawing on, and they won't know where we are or what is happening. I can't imagine they'll be able to sleep tonight. I don't think I can either, even though I'm tired.

My stomach is churning with worry – and hunger too, I suddenly realize. Remembering the biscuits Kolya gave us, I pull the parcel from my apron pocket and offer one to Benjamin, before popping one into my own mouth.

The eaves creak above us. I look up and see a long streak of blackness glistening with stars. It's not part of the sky – it's clinging to the house's roof and looks exactly like the blackness inside The Gate. "Oh no." The biscuit in my mouth suddenly feels dry and impossible to swallow.

Benjamin follows my gaze to the house's chimney. The starry blackness is seeping out from there. "That's part of whatever is inside The Gate escaping, isn't it?" He pales.

I nod, not knowing what to say or do. I don't understand exactly what is happening up on the roof, but it's clear The Gate is becoming more and more dangerous to both the house and the land of the living.

The dark streak shifts in the wind and grows longer and wider. I catch the scent of stardust and the black ocean – a familiar scent during guidings, but here and now it sends a shiver through me. The house picks up speed, jumps over smaller trees and swerves around bigger ones, tilting and swaying with the movement.

"I'm going to see what is ahead of us now," I say, edging along the back porch. I reach the corner of the house and peer around it, looking in the direction the house is running.

A cliff is ahead, a little way to the south-east. It rises above the trees, steep and jagged against the inky sky. The house is speeding towards it. I crane my neck and make out an opening in the cliff – a cave big enough for the house to run inside.

Benjamin steps beside me. Jack is awake now, perched on his shoulder. He leans over to caw a greeting into my ear.

“I think the house is heading for that cave.” I point ahead and a few moments later we plunge into darkness. I reach for Benjamin’s arm, my heart thumping in these strange, new surroundings. It’s too dark to see, the air is icily cold and sounds echo all around us – the house’s feet smacking against wet rock, the drip and trickle of water on the cave walls and, from the front of the house, the roar of the wind rushing into The Gate.

Jack hops onto my shoulder and his claws dig sharply into my skin. He’s apprehensive about where we are. Valiant slides over and leans close, trembling nervously. I wonder if the mortar is remembering all the years it spent in the dark and I place a hand on the bowl and try to think comforting thoughts. “The house knows where it’s going and will keep us safe,” I say, trying to reassure myself as much as everyone else.

The cave slopes steeply downwards, the temperature drops even more and the echoes deepen.

“I think the cave has widened,” Benjamin says.

A soft, pink glow appears ahead. We peer at it in confusion.

“It’s too early to be the light from a sunrise.” My ears pop with a change in pressure and I have the strangest feeling that we have passed through some kind of doorway. The pink light is beneath us now and I lean over the balustrade, trying to work out where it’s coming from.

The house’s feet are splashing into water with a distinctly pink glow. I stare at it, mesmerized, and realize the water is getting deeper. The house’s toes sink beneath the surface, then its ankles, then its legs.

“Are you sure the house knows where it’s going?” Benjamin’s voice wavers as the strange pink water washes over the porch steps.

The floorboards beneath us thrum reassuringly and I nod to Benjamin. But it’s difficult to feel comforted when the splashing has turned to sloshing and the water is lapping higher and higher. We must be deep underground. I’ve lost all sense of which way we are heading. And now the house is sinking into glowing pink water.

Jack shivers against my neck and I quietly hum the lullaby Baba used to play for us on her *balalaika* when I was little.

After a few more steps, the house is swimming. The walls of the cave, invisible in the darkness until now, glow a brilliant teal-blue. My eyes

widen as I finally see how big this place is. It's a cavern so enormous that a whole thunder of Yaga houses could fit inside.

"I can't believe this is all underground." Benjamin stares at the ceiling high above as the house follows the curve of the cavern walls. It swims around a bend and an arc of bright light appears ahead. "A way out!" Benjamin points at it with excitement.

The house swims through the arc and emerges on a vast ocean, glowing pink beneath a pale-green sky, striped with ribbons of violet and gold light. The moon floats low and is huge and full, not like the smaller crescent moon back in the forest.

"What is this place?" Benjamin whispers, echoing my own thoughts.

I peer at the pink water, wondering if some algae is giving it this colour. Then I look up at the sky, trying to work out if it might be some kind of aurora giving it these bright tones. But it is all so unfamiliar, as if we have moved into another world. "I had this feeling back in the cavern." I turn to Benjamin. "I felt like we had passed through some kind of doorway. It was something like how I felt when I stepped through The Gate, trying to get Baba back. But it was different too."

"Do you think we might have passed through some other kind of Gate?" Benjamin asks.

"Maybe. In *The Book of Yaga*, there is a long and complicated chapter about Gates and Realms. Baba tried explaining it to me once. She said the world has different layers of reality and not all of them are visible to everyone all the time. She said Gates are places where it is possible to step between layers, into different Realms. She said more, but I got distracted." The bees buzz in my chest. I wish I had paid more attention to Baba that day. And on so many other days too. Whatever was distracting me, it would have been more important for me to listen to Baba.

The house swings up and out of the water, pulling me from my thoughts. Benjamin grabs my arm to stop me from sliding backwards. There must be a sand bank or a rocky outcrop just beneath the surface of the ocean, because now the house appears to be walking on the water.

Benjamin lets out a squeal as the house bursts into a run. I suddenly remember the blurry memory the house shared with me of running over a pink ocean beneath a green sky, on the way to Gate Carver Antek's island, and I realize the house was trying to prepare me for this strange place.

Jack squawks with excitement, flaps onto the balustrade and opens his wings to catch the rushing air in his feathers. Arcs of pink water spray up around us and tiny rainbows shiver in the air. It's beautiful, but I step back, not wanting to get wet and cold again.

The house realizes what I'm doing, grabs me and Benjamin with its vines and swings us upwards. Benjamin's eyes widen with panic, so I reach out and grab his hands. "It's all right," I say. "The house is only lifting us away from the water."

The vines carry us up to the roof and I stare with concern at the streak of starry blackness clinging to the tiles, downwind of the chimney. As we're lifted over it, I peer down. No wind rushes into this blackness, but it still makes me shiver with fear. It looks like a bottomless puddle, holding endless night in its depths.

I turn away from the darkness as the vines place us safely on the other side of the chimney. "Look!" I point across the ocean, in the direction the house is running. A small island sits on the horizon. It has some kind of structure on it, rising from sandy ground that is the same brilliant shade of teal-blue as the rocks in the cavern. "That must be Gate Carver Antek's house!"

The house dips its roof in a nod, before running even faster across the path beneath the water. I take a deep breath of the cool air and gaze at the pink ocean beneath the green sky. "This is amazing. *You* are amazing, House. Running with you, anywhere, is the best thing in the world. And soon we'll be able to do it safely again, without The Gate expanding inside you."

The mossy roof tiles glow with happiness at my words, but yet again I sense a strange, uncertain feeling in the house too, and it makes my heart feel heavy beneath the excitement. I wonder for a moment if the house feels sorrow. But that can't be right, can it? I hope the house is only worried about The Gate, and not hiding something more.

"Gate Carver Antek will fix The Gate, House. We're almost there!" I shout encouragingly.

The island rises ahead of us, shining brilliant blue, but as the structure comes into focus, I frown. It looks like it was a stone house once, but it's in ruins now – all that's left are a few dark-grey crumbling pillars and walls. My skin prickles with dread. I think how the house's memory of Gate

Carver Antek must have been hundreds of years old. *What if he isn't around any more? What if there is nobody here to help us close The Gate?*

The Fireplace

I stare at the crumbling walls ahead. Disappointment falls heavily over the house, adding to my own.

“Perhaps this was Gate Carver Antek’s home once, but it doesn’t look like anybody has been here for a very long time,” Benjamin says sadly.

The house steps onto the bright-blue sand of the island and shakes the pink water from its long legs. Vines lift me and Benjamin from the roof down to the back porch. The wind rushing into The Gate at the front of the house is louder than ever.

“What can we do now?” I ask in despair.

“Look over there.” Benjamin points to the most complete wall that remains on the island. It has a fireplace in it, with a carved wooden mantelpiece. “Is that a letter?”

I peer at a small, pale rectangle balanced on the mantelpiece. The house folds its chicken legs beneath it and sits, and the floorboards roll, nudging us towards the back porch steps.

“Let’s go and see.” We walk down the steps, then across the sandy ground towards the lonely fireplace. Jack watches from the balustrade and Valiant, beside him, leans forwards curiously.

As we draw near the fireplace, the scent of spring wildflowers makes me pause – lilac, meadowsweet and baby’s breath – the same scents from the house’s memories. I hear the sigh of tall grasses in a breeze and the faint hum of insects flying. These familiar scents and sounds make no sense here, on this small blue island in the middle of a glowing pink ocean.

I lean down and look through the fireplace. I shouldn’t be shocked after everything we’ve seen since we entered the cave in the cliff, but I am. “There is a meadow through there!” I gasp and warm air floods my lungs. Benjamin leans down and looks through too, into yet another world.

“There are tall grasses and spring flowers beneath a blue sky,” I shout back to the house.

“And stone archways arranged in a circle in the middle of the meadow,” Benjamin adds. “They look old, speckled with lichen, and there are…” Benjamin leans further into the fireplace. “There are seven archways.”

I take a slow breath, trying to calm my speeding thoughts. “What is this place? What should we do?”

“Maybe the letter will help,” Benjamin suggests.

In the shock of seeing the meadow, I had forgotten about the letter. I pick it up with trembling fingers and notice a small leather pouch behind it.

I stare at the words written on the envelope. They are formed using the Cyrillic alphabet, like the words on the stone marker were, and it takes me a moment to read them.

“It says, *For the next Gate Carver*.” I glance back to the house and from the downwards curve of its roof I realize this isn’t what it was expecting at all. “Should I open it?” I ask, turning the envelope over in my hands.

“I know it’s not addressed to us, but it’s our only clue,” Benjamin says.

I nod in agreement, slide a finger beneath the flap of the envelope, then pull out the paper inside.

The words on the letter are written hastily, shakily, and as I read them aloud the emotions trapped inside them escape through my own wavering voice.

I broke the rules. I opened The Gate to the Past, to see my dearest loved one again.

I know if I step through, I will be but a ghost, a soul adrift, separated from the great cycle.

But I would rather fade away in the light of my loved one than continue here alone.

I am sorry. Please close The Gate I opened.

My tools are yours now. Carve well.

Antek.

I stare at the letter, feeling heavy with sadness. “I wish he hadn’t felt so alone,” I say finally. I don’t fully understand what Gate Carver Antek has done, or how we can carry out his request. But I do understand what it is like to feel alone and how that can lead you to making rash decisions.

“A Gate to the Past,” Benjamin whispers. “I didn’t know that such a thing existed.”

“Me neither.” I replace the letter and pick up the pouch instead. It’s heavier than it looks. The leather is soft and well-worn, a thin fraying strip holding it together. I untie it carefully and the pouch unrolls to reveal several neat compartments containing small tools made of shining metal, and another with a small notebook inside.

I look from the tools to the meadow inside the fireplace with the circle of stone archways. “So I guess Gate Carver Antek wanted the next Gate Carver to use these tools to close The Gate to the Past that he left open, through there.”

Benjamin nods. “But it looks like the next Gate Carver hasn’t arrived yet. Do you think we could figure out how to do it?”

“I think we should try, for Antek. Perhaps the notebook will explain what to do.” I slide the notebook out of the pouch and flick through page after page of tiny Cyrillic script and lists of symbols that I don’t recognize at all. Uncertainty swirls inside me. “This all looks very complicated.”

“We can work it out together.” Benjamin gives me a small but reassuring smile. “I’m sure we can.”

A puff of starry blackness suddenly shoots out of the house’s crumpled chimney and my throat thickens as it falls over the roof beside the other puddle of darkness. The house slumps, as if these dark patches on its roof are weighing it down.

The pouch shifts in my hands, the tools glint in the light and a spark of realization flashes through me. “If we can figure out how to close The Gate to the Past, then we can figure out how to close The Gate inside the house too!” Hope bubbles up inside me. “You’re right, Benjamin. We can do this. We must – for the house and for everything in danger from The Gate, as well as for Antek.”

I glance over to Jack and Valiant. “Perhaps you two should wait here with the house. Benjamin and I will go through the fireplace, figure out how to close The Gate to the Past, then come back and do the same for The Gate in the house.” I try to sound confident but nervousness flutters through me. *What if we can’t do this? What if we get it wrong and make everything worse again?*

“Ready?” Benjamin takes my hand and his warmth steadies me. I look at the house, sitting on the blue sand and curving heavily over itself. The Gate roars behind the vines webbed across the front wall. I turn to Benjamin and nod firmly. I must be strong for the house now.

We duck through the fireplace together. I hear Jack squawking, then feel him fly past my cheek. I should have guessed he would follow me – he rarely remains behind when I ask him to. Back in The Land of Lakes he used to follow me to school and pace around outside impatiently while I sat in my lessons.

My ears pop as we emerge through the fireplace and I reel at the strange feeling of stepping into this new world. We stand in the meadow before the stone archways and I take a deep breath.

Jack lands on one of the archways ahead. “Careful, Jack. I don’t know much about all these Gates yet, but I know I don’t want to lose you in one.”

Jack caws in agreement and gives a deep nod.

Benjamin and I take a couple of steps forwards. The sky above the meadow is pale blue and the air is warm. Tall grasses, their heads bowed with the weight of seeds, and wildflowers sway in a gentle breeze. This place is in a different time and season to the forest we came from, and to the pink-oceaned world we ran through in the house.

My mind reels again as I think about different Gates, different layers of realities and different Realms. The world contains so many mysteries that even if I live as long as an Ancient Elder, I think there will always be new things to discover.

I take a closer look at the stone archways. Six of them are empty, framing clear views of the meadow. But the seventh is different. Light and shadows shift inside it. “That must be The Gate to the Past, the one Gate Carver Antek left open.” I turn my back on that archway – Gate Carver Antek’s words about becoming a soul adrift and fading away are fresh in my mind, so I don’t think we should look inside until we know more about it.

“Let’s see what we can figure out from this book.” I sit amongst the fluffy grass heads and flowers and open the Gate Carver’s notebook. “I should read as much as possible before we step any closer.”

Benjamin sits beside me. “Can you translate it for me?”

I nod and look at the first page. “This is all about different types of Gates.” I peer closer, quickly becoming fascinated. I never considered there were any other types besides the sort found in my house.

“It says The Gates of Time include The Gate to the Past, and three gates called The Gates of Possibility. Look at this.” I turn the page and point to a diagram that looks something like a branching tree.

Benjamin stares at the picture thoughtfully. “It looks like each of The Gates of Possibility split into hundreds or even thousands of interconnected pathways. It’s so complicated!”

“I guess because our futures always have so many possibilities,” I wonder aloud as I turn the page. I put my fingers gently on the picture of

The Gate on the next page. This is The Gate I have known all my life. “The Gate to the Stars, like the one in my house.”

“Does it say anything about one exploding or expanding?” Benjamin asks.

I shake my head. “It just says that The Gate to the Stars is one of The Gates of the Great Cycle. The other one is called The Gate to the Earth, and I think this diagram shows how these two Gates are different places to step into and out of the great cycle.” I turn another page and tilt my head in curiosity at the last type of Gate that is described.

“The Gate to the Soul.” I turn the book to show Benjamin the picture. “It says this Gate allows someone to glimpse something of their soul that they might benefit from seeing at a particular time.”

“That’s amazing.” Benjamin’s eyes widen.

I begin to wonder what The Gate to the Soul would show me now, but I force myself to turn the page. That isn’t why we’re here.

“The next section explains how to open Gates.” I point at the list of symbols on the page. “It says a Gate Carver should cut through The Fabric of Reality, using the right symbol for the type of Gate they want to open.” I glance at the shining metal tools tucked in the front of the pouch, and my thoughts drift again.

I imagine Gate Carver Antek carving The Gate to the Stars inside my house with delicate swirling circles, hundreds of years ago when the house was young. I wonder how the house felt. Was it scared? Excited? Proud? How would its life have been different if it didn’t have such a Gate?

I think back to the branching diagram from a few pages ago. Life can be so many things. How does anyone choose which path to take with certainty? I remember all the times that Yaga Tatyana has told me to listen to my heart recently and finally I think I understand why. Perhaps that is the best way to be sure of anything. Perhaps it is the only way.

“What about closing Gates?” Benjamin asks, pulling me from my thoughts.

I skip through the pages of symbols. “Here it is,” I say, peering at a small paragraph about closing Gates. “It says most Gates close naturally in their own time, but that if necessary, a Gate can be closed by sewing The Fabric of Reality back together using the long needle tool and the correct type of thread.”

“Is that all it says?” Benjamin asks.

I read the paragraph again, then flick through the book to make sure I'm not missing anything. "That's it." I bite my lip. Closing a Gate feels like such a weighty task, with so many things that could go wrong. How can we do it with just a needle and thread?

My fingers tremble as I close the notebook and look at the tools in the pouch again. I slide the long needle out and examine the colourful skeins of shining thread that are tucked neatly beside it. Each skein has a tiny label and I find one that says *The Gate to the Past.* The thread is a deep cerulean blue and feels warm in my hand as I carefully poke it through the eye of the needle and tie a knot in one end.

"I've never been very good at sewing," I say to Benjamin. "So I hope neatness won't matter."

"Would you like me to do it?" Benjamin offers. "I did a sewing project last year at school that I was quite proud of."

I think for a moment, but then shake my head. This feels like something I should do. I want to learn how to save the house because it saved me, and because it means everything to me. And a part of me hopes that by doing this, I might somehow make up for the times in the past when I didn't give the house or Baba the attention or care they deserved. "That's kind of you, Benjamin," I reply. "But I'd like to do this. Could you stay near me though, and make sure I don't get lost in The Gate to the Past like Gate Carver Antek did? It sounds dangerous for someone to even look inside."

"I'll stay right beside you, and I won't look into The Gate," Benjamin says firmly. "Then I can make sure that neither of us get lost in there."

Jack lands on my shoulder and caws in agreement.

"Thank you both." I rise to my feet and tuck the pouch and the notebook in my apron pocket, but keep the needle and thread in my hand as we walk towards The Gate to the Past.

I try to keep my gaze on the stone archway rather than the images shifting inside it. For the first time I notice symbols carved in the stone and realize they match some from the list in the notebook. Most of the symbols on this archway are anticlockwise spirals, that I guess might represent looking into the past. Keeping my focus on the spirals, I step close to the archway and lift the needle and thread. But from the corner of my eyes, I see something inside The Gate to the Past that takes my breath away. *Baba.*

The Gate to the Past

My heart pounds. I know I should look away, but I can't. *It's Baba.* My Baba, inside the stone archway, only a step away from me. She is stirring a great cauldron of *borsch* over a roaring fire, as I have watched her do so many times before.

She turns to me and smiles, an excited twinkle in her eyes. "You look lovely, my *pchelka*. Are you ready?"

I put a hand on the stone archway to stop myself from stepping through. I want to reach out and pull Baba into a hug more than I've wanted anything in my life.

"Are you all right, Marinka?" Benjamin's voice sounds far away, while Baba is right here.

"The dead will be here soon. Could you pour the *kvass*?" Baba glances at the table, where an army of stout glasses are waiting to be filled with the dark, pungent drink. I realize Baba is in the front room of our house, as it used to be before The Gate exploded. It's warm, familiar and inviting.

"Oh, Baba." Tears well in my eyes. I feel myself leaning towards her and I don't know how I can resist any more. I want to step through and hold her. I want to ask her to forgive me, for everything I ever did wrong, especially all the things that led to her leaving through The Gate. And I want to ask if there is any way she can come home.

I suddenly understand why Gate Carver Antek stepped through this Gate and I wonder what would happen if I did. *Would it really be so bad? Could I go back to before I lost Baba and make different decisions this time? Could I save her?*

Jack’s claws dig into my shoulder and I feel Benjamin’s hand on my arm. “Marinka?” he says again and this time his voice is louder. Benjamin tugs me back from The Gate and the image of Baba dissolves into mist. I shudder, scared and confused.

“I saw Baba.” I turn to Benjamin, my eyes brimming with tears. “I wanted to step through The Gate to her so badly, even though I knew I shouldn’t.”

Benjamin squeezes my arm comfortingly. “It’s all right. I won’t let you disappear in there.”

I take a deep breath and nod. “It’s just a memory,” I say to myself more than Benjamin. “So I couldn’t change anything there. I couldn’t save Baba. The past is the past.” I wipe away a tear rolling down my cheek. “Gate Carver Antek wrote that stepping through would make him a ghost, a soul adrift. He decided to fade away in the past, rather than live in the present and move into the future. But that’s not what I want.” I lift the needle and thread. “I want the present and the future.”

Jack flaps up onto the stone archway and I stare at him to keep my gaze from being pulled back to Baba. Near his claws is a shimmering line. It sparkles in the air as it runs down the centre of the archway. “Oh!” I point at the line. “I think that must be the cut in The Fabric of Reality that needs stitching up.”

I reach up and push the needle into the line. There is a slight resistance, as if I am pushing it through cotton or linen. My eyes widen with wonder as I pull the thread through and the small knot at the end of it catches on something invisible.

Working by instinct, and using all my willpower not to glance back through The Gate, I make another stitch along the shimmering line. Then I pull the thread tight. The images just out of my focus get marginally smaller.

“It’s working!” I glance over to Benjamin with a flush of pride and relief. Although my heart aches at the thought of losing this window to Baba, I’m excited that I’m a step closer to saving the house.

Jack cackles encouragingly and I push the needle through again. Stitch by stitch, The Gate to the Past gets smaller, until I am kneeling on the floor and can see that with one more stitch it will close completely. I pull the thread and The Gate shrinks to the size of my palm.

I should make one last tug and tie a knot. But instead I glance back through to look at Baba again. I want to see her once more and thank her for all her love and care, and tell her that I love her too, even if she can't hear or see me. And perhaps, if I can bring myself to say it, I'd like to whisper goodbye.

But Baba isn't there any more. A different scene shimmers, one that makes my skin tingle like I've come in from the cold.

This isn't a memory I know, but my heart instantly recognizes the two people holding a baby. *They're my parents* – my birth parents, who died when I was baby and who I've only ever known through Baba's stories.

I stare at the scene intently, trying to etch every detail into my mind. My father has dark curly hair, a kind smile and large, gentle hands. My mother has red hair and a freckled nose, like me. Both my parents are curving over me as a baby, gazing into my eyes with such looks of intense love that even from the other side of this Gate, I feel like I'm being held in their warm embrace.

Someone else shifts into view and I gasp. It's an older woman with greying red hair. She puts a hand on my mother's shoulder and smiles. I realize she must be my maternal grandmother, but I recognize her from somewhere else too.

The puzzle piece I've felt I was missing since the house shared its memories with me clicks into place. "My grandmother is Eva! Anna's sister!" I glance to Benjamin again, who only stares at me in confusion. "I recognize her from Anna's memories – Anna, the woman I guided, Kolya's wife…" I pause, realizing something else that makes a whirl of emotions rush into my chest. "Kolya is my family! He must be my…" I pause again, trying to figure out how we are related. A smile grows on my face at this new experience – I've never had to work out how I'm related to anyone before. "He must be my great-uncle," I say decisively.

"Kolya is your great-uncle?" Benjamin's eyes widen with surprise. "This is incredible, Marinka!"

"I wonder if the house knew? If it worked it out when I guided Anna, or perhaps it knew even before that…" My gaze shifts to the needle in my hand. Right now I should focus on finishing this stitch and closing The Gate. But as I prepare myself to make the final tug, my thoughts drift once again to Baba. I close my eyes and make a silent wish that The Gate will

show her to me, one last time. Then I open my eyes, look at the shimmering images and see her.

Baba is dancing with the dead, smiling her crooked-toothed smile. Tears flood my eyes and stream down my cheeks. The needle trembles in my hand.

“You can do it, Marinka,” Benjamin encourages gently. “You’re almost there.”

Jack hops onto my shoulder and nestles his head against my neck. He peers through The Gate too and together we watch Baba twirling around and laughing with joy. To see Baba again, so full of love and life, is wonderful, even though I know I can only do it for a moment.

All too soon, Jack tugs on my earlobe. I take a deep breath and nod. I understand the present and the future await.

“Thank you,” I whisper to Baba. “For everything. And I am sorry for every mistake I ever made. I hope you can forgive me.” Baba carries on dancing, her tasselled shawl and long skirt streaming through the air. “I love you,” I say louder, as I pull the thread and tie a knot. “Goodbye.”

Baba and the house around her disappear. All I can see through the stone archway now is the meadow, fluffy grass and wildflowers swaying in a gentle breeze.

“You did it, Marinka.” Benjamin pulls me into a hug. “Well done.”

I wipe away my tears with Baba’s headscarf, which is still tied around my wrist. And I remind myself that I have my memories – I don’t need a Gate to see them.

“*We* did it,” I say to Benjamin. “Thank you for keeping me safe.” Jack tugs on my earlobe again. “And you, Jack!” I reach up and stroke his neck. “Come on, let’s go back to the house.”

I rise to my feet and tuck the needle in the pouch as we walk towards the fireplace. My fingertips brush another of the Gate Carving tools, and something like a shock of static sparks through me. I stop still and glance around the other stone archways until my gaze alights on one with a symbol above it that spirals inwards. I recognize the symbol from Gate Carver Antek’s notebook. “That’s The Gate to the Soul,” I say, wondering again what it would show me.

Benjamin pauses and follows my gaze, and an idea creeps into my mind.

“Shall we take a look?” I suggest.

“I don’t think that’s a good—”

“It would only take a moment.” Words rush off my tongue as I try to convince Benjamin, and maybe myself, that this is a good idea. “We could make a tiny cut with the Gate Carving tool, take a small peek, and now we know how to close The Gate afterwards.”

“I’m curious what The Gate to the Soul would show me too, Marinka, but I’m also worried what could go wrong. Remember what happened to Gate Carver Antek,” Benjamin urges. “And The Gate in your house. I think these Gates are dangerous, and we don’t really know what we’re doing.”

“We have the notebook, and each other!” I nod to Benjamin eagerly. “Gate Carver Antek was alone but we can keep each other safe. Think what The Gate to the Soul might show us!”

“I’m not sure, Marinka.” Benjamin looks at me apologetically.

“I understand.” I sigh. “I just thought it might help us both. You know, with everything we talked about in The Land of Castles and Giants. How I’ve been feeling unsettled, like something is missing from my life.” I pause, thinking about the bees in my chest now – all my regrets and guilt – and for the first time I wonder if they have something to do with the unsettled feeling. “And you being unsure whether to move schools or not, because you’re worried about starting somewhere new.”

Benjamin nods slowly and my heart beats faster as I realize he’s thinking about doing this.

“Looking into The Gate to the Soul could help us, Benjamin. It could show us what we need to see to figure out what to do back in The Land of Lakes to be truly happy.” I glance round the field and the stone archways. “This will probably be the only chance we ever have to do this.”

“A tiny cut, and we’ll keep each other safe?” Benjamin asks uncertainly.

“I promise.” I tug Benjamin towards The Gate to the Soul in excitement.

Jack squawks in disapproval, but I ignore him and flick through the notebook pages to check the symbols we need. I practise making their shapes in the air a few times with my fingers. When I’m sure I can make them smoothly, I lift the carving tool towards the edge of the stone archway, but pause to look at Benjamin. He looks back at me nervously, but nods.

“Are you sure?” I ask. “I know I’ve just tried to convince you to do this with me, and I do want to, but if you don’t then we won’t—” My words rush out in a jumble, but Benjamin nods again and puts his hand on my arm reassuringly.

“A tiny cut,” he says. “And we’ll keep each other safe.” His voice is sure and steady this time.

“All right.” I turn back to the stone archway and begin slicing a curving line. The carving tool moves smoothly – I can only feel a slight resistance, as if I’m cutting through the softest cookie dough.

Golden sparks fly from the tip of the tool and a rip opens in the air. A buzzing sound flows through the rip and flashes of light shine into my eyes. I squint against the brightness and focus on completing the spiral shape.

The rip grows larger and an image appears inside the palm-sized space. *It’s a bee in a jar.* I peer at it in confusion, all my breath trapped in my lungs. Baba used to say I had the impatience and temper of a bee in a jar. That’s one of the reasons she called me her *pchelka* – her little bee.

The buzzing sound is coming from the bee, angrily bumping against the walls of the jar. And the flashes of light are sunbeams reflecting from the glass. I have an uncontrollable urge to release the bee. Without thinking, I drop the carving tool, reach through the opening I’ve made and pick up the jar.

Benjamin’s hand tightens on my arm and Jack squawks loudly into my ear, but I don’t stop. The jar feels real. The glass is warm and vibrating with the frustration of the bee inside. I unscrew the lid and hold the jar up into the light. The bee pauses for a moment, hovering silently. Then it rises out of the jar and into a sunbeam. In a wingbeat, the bee transforms into a huge glowing bird with fiery feathers. It stretches its great wings and flaps up and away, out of sight.

The jar vanishes. My hands tingle as if they have pins and needles, and I pull them quickly back through the rip. A great breath floods into my lungs and I feel like I’ve woken from a dream.

“Are you all right, Marinka?” Benjamin asks.

“Yes, I’m fine. Do you still want to look?”

Benjamin nods and I take a step to the side so he can peer through the tear. I watch his eyes widen. He leans forward and I hold his arm tight, like he held mine.

“Benjamin?” I say quietly, wanting to remind him that I’m here.

Benjamin nods to show that he’s heard me. He stares into The Gate for a few moments longer, then takes a step backwards. He looks calmer somehow, and more sure of himself. I wonder what he saw, but I don’t ask him. It feels too personal, and not the right time to talk about it yet. I think I

need time to make sense of what I saw and I imagine Benjamin might feel the same way.

"Let's close this now and get back to the house." I fumble for the needle and thread it with some green-gold thread labelled *The Gate to the Soul*. Then I stitch the small rip back up and retrieve the carving tool from the ground.

Jack flies ahead and swoops through the fireplace first. I glance back at the meadow and the stone archways one last time, thinking about everything I saw here: the glimpse into my soul that might somehow help me; the vision of my parents and my grandmother Eva that made me realize Kolya is my great-uncle; and the last image of Baba dancing.

Even though it ached to see Baba, it was good to say goodbye in some way, and to realize how much I don't want to get lost in the past. More than anything, I want to stay in the present – with Benjamin and Jack, Yaga Tatyana and Benjamin's father – and I want to save the house, so that we can all move into our future together.

A Twist from Each Realm

My ears pop as Benjamin and I step through the fireplace. The house sits up straighter in anticipation. Jack, who was flying ahead of us, alights on the eaves and caws triumphantly.

“We closed The Gate to the Past.” I smile proudly.

Vines unfurl and clap together in a rustling applause.

“Thank you, House.” I make a small bow and Benjamin blushes. “Now we know how to close The Gate inside you. We just need to get close enough to sew…” My voice trails away as I realize how difficult that will be.

The vines stop rustling and I hear the winds rushing into The Gate at the front of the house.

“The Gate is so big now and the winds so powerful… How can we do this?” I rub my forehead, desperately trying to think of a way we could get close enough to The Gate without being pulled inside.

“Could the house’s vines hold us safe?” Benjamin asks.

I look up at the house, although I think I know the answer. A vine reaches down and hugs my shoulder. It trembles and my worries are confirmed. “The house isn’t sure that it could keep us safe,” I say to Benjamin. “It isn’t strong enough on its own. But there must be a way, if we all work together somehow…”

Valiant hops forwards on the porch, tumbles down the steps, then bumps into my legs. I put my hand on the warm wood of the mortar and feel it thrumming with energy. An idea rumbles into my thoughts. “Valiant can help! If you are willing, of course.” Valiant hops in agreement and I look

back to the house. “Valiant has so much power. If we stay inside the mortar’s bowl, it could carry us to the edge of The Gate safely.”

The eaves shift uncertainly.

“You could hold Valiant too!” I suggest, excitement fizzing through me now. “With your vines *and* Valiant’s power pulling us back from The Gate, that should be enough to keep us safe.”

The vine around my shoulder keeps on trembling.

“I know it’s dangerous, House. But we must try. If we don’t, then The Gate will keep on growing and pulling things inside, and none of us will be safe ever again. Now is our chance to stop this before it gets any worse.”

The house’s eaves remain tilted with concern, but vines begin weaving themselves together to make thicker ropes, so I know it’s going to let us try. “Thank you, House.”

Jack glides down and lands on my shoulder. I reach up and give him a stroke. “I’m sorry, Jack, but you really are going to have to stay here this time. It wouldn’t be safe for you in the house.”

My chest tightens as I remember what it was like to be in the room with The Gate after it exploded. The icy winds whirling, pulling everything towards the darkness. The panic I felt when I almost got sucked inside; my desperate wish not to go in there again, because I belong in the land of the living. The Gate is even larger now, the winds even stronger.

Fear smothers my courage. But I look at the house and know, deep in my thumping heart, that I must find a way to do this. The house is my whole world and always has been. I love it with every breath in my body, every spark in my mind and all the stardust in my soul.

I turn to Benjamin and take his hands. They are trembling, like my own and like the house’s vines. I want him to know that he doesn’t have to come with me.

“Benjamin, I can do this on my own,” I say as confidently as I can. Benjamin shakes his head, but I carry on. “You could stay outside the house, where it’s safer. And if something goes wrong, you could find Yaga Tatyana—” My words get stuck in my throat, because they don’t feel like the truth any more. If I get sucked into The Gate, I don’t think anybody could save me, and The Gate would keep on expanding, pulling everything into it. I don’t know how Benjamin would find Yaga Tatyana, nor what they could do to stop this. I try to swallow back my fear, but it only rises again, even thicker than before.

“I’m coming with you,” Benjamin says firmly. “You and the house mean everything to me. And the whole of the land of the living is in danger! I want to help. I *need* to help – this is my world too, with everyone I love in it. And we stand a better chance of closing The Gate if we do this together. The mortar will be heavier with both of us inside, so it will be more difficult for it to be pulled into The Gate, and I can help steer Valiant while you sew. And if Valiant gets energy from the bond you share, I wonder if I also bond with Valiant, would that give us even more power?”

Valiant nods eagerly.

“That’s decided then.” Benjamin smiles, although his fingers continue trembling beneath my own.

I’m scared for Benjamin now as well as for myself and for everything that could go wrong. “I’m not sure I have enough courage for both of us this time,” I whisper.

“That’s all right,” Benjamin says. “Somewhere along the way, I realized that you make me feel braver, not because you share your courage with me but because you help me find my own. And now we can help each other find all the courage we need.”

The warmth of Benjamin’s friendship and his willingness to help – even now, when he’s scared – makes me swell not only with courage but with hope and determination too. “What about your motion sickness?” I ask with a smile.

Benjamin laughs. “It’s a small price to pay for saving your house and the whole of the land of the living.”

Jack presses his head against my neck and chirrs something softly. I reach up to give him another stroke and the thought of leaving him alone out here makes my heart ache. But I know I must do it, to keep him safe. “I’ll see you soon, Jack,” I say, not wanting to think of the alternative. I need to believe we can do this.

Jack flies back up to the house’s roof, where he settles near the crumpled chimney.

I pull the pouch from my apron pocket, open it and find the thread for The Gate to the Stars. It’s a glistening dark-greenish colour, flecked with silver. I push one end through the eye of the needle and stare at the length of thread trailing in my hand.

“I’m not sure there is enough thread here to close The Gate, considering how big it has grown.”

“Could we use one of the other kinds of threads too?” Benjamin asks.

I flick through the pages of the notebook to a small section at the back about tools and threads. “It says here that ‘it is essential to use the right type of thread for each Gate, containing a twist from each Realm’.”

I stare at the thread in my hands and for the first time notice that it’s made of two thinner threads twisted together. One is pale green and the other a starry black. *Could one twist be from the land of the living and the other from the land of the dead?*

I remember my lamp beneath Marzanna’s Garden and how the pale green liquid inside it was streaked with the same kind of starry darkness. *Because I am from both places too*.

A breeze blows my curls across my face and I know exactly what I can use if I run out of thread. “I can use my hair!” I exclaim. “Because I am from both Realms.”

“Will that work?” Benjamin asks.

“I feel in my heart that it will,” I say, thinking how it feels right to bind a part of myself to the house, when we are bound together in so many other ways too.

“All right.” Benjamin nods. “I trust your heart.”

I reach for the sharpest of the Gate Carving tools and slice off a section of my hair at the nape of my neck. Then I sit and separate the strands, ready to twist them together.

Benjamin sits beside me to help and after a few minutes we’ve extended the glistening thread to double its original length. It’s a little messy, but at least I feel more confident that we now have enough to sew The Gate closed. I wrap the thread loosely around my hand, then rise to my feet.

“Ready?” I ask. Benjamin nods and Valiant tilts towards us.

I climb inside the mortar first, then look to Benjamin. “Are you sure you want to come?” I ask.

“Absolutely.” He climbs in beside me. “So how do I make a bond with Valiant?”

“If you put your hands on the wood of the mortar or pestle and be open to what Valiant is thinking and feeling, it will happen naturally, I think.”

Benjamin puts his hands on the edge of the bowl and I place one of mine on the pestle, keeping my other hand free to hold the needle and thread. Energy surges through Valiant, stronger than ever before.

“I feel it!” Benjamin’s eyes widen. “It’s like all of Valiant’s excitement about flying is rushing through me. And I see memories of flights Valiant has made before too. It’s amazing!” Benjamin turns to me. “Is this what it’s like between you and your house when you share thoughts and feelings?”

“It’s similar.” I nod. “But the bond with Valiant is unique too.” I close my eyes and think about rising into the air, and Valiant floats upwards. I open my eyes again and turn to Benjamin. “The way that our thoughts can become part of controlling the flight is something special. Try thinking about flying to the corner of the house,” I suggest.

Benjamin looks in the direction I pointed and Valiant flies smoothly that way.

“That’s it! Well done!” I smile, but then the sound of the winds grows louder and my muscles tense with nervousness. Valiant stops and hovers in the air. “Once we round the corner, the winds are going to pull us straight towards the front of the house,” I say.

Thick vine ropes snake down from the eaves and wrap tightly around Valiant.

Jack caws from the roof and nods his head in encouragement.

“All right.” I take a deep breath. “Let’s go.”

We round the corner and are immediately swept into an icy gust. Benjamin and I duck low in the mortar to try to escape some of the blast. We zoom towards the front of the house, too fast.

“Valiant!” I shout. “Can you slow down?” I pull back on the pestle with one hand, and the needle slips from my other hand. I struggle to get a grip on it again and look at Benjamin, feeling suddenly overwhelmed by the task ahead. We’re not even inside the house yet and I already feel we’re out of control.

Benjamin moves a hand to the pestle and places it over mine. Our fingers interlock, then one of the vines holding Valiant reaches up and wraps around our fingers too.

Despite the cold wind gusting around us, I feel a sudden rush of warmth. I imagine it is all our courage – mine, Benjamin’s, Valiant’s and the house’s – all twisting together and becoming stronger, like the thread in my other hand is stronger because it’s made of twists from each Realm. I think how Benjamin said we can help each other find the courage we need and I realize how much stronger we all are together.

But then the vines over the front wall untangle, the front door flies open and we’re whooshed into the house so fast that it pushes every thought from my mind.

The Gate to the Stars

The wind pulls us into the front room of the house so fast we're flung backwards. My spine hits the back of the mortar's bowl painfully and one of the house's vines reaches up to stop Benjamin from tipping all the way out. Valiant tilts one way, then the other, trying to regain balance.

I try to look around the room, but the wind whirls so fast it stings my eyes. There is little to see anyway. The Gate almost fills the space, huge and dark but also bright with stars. The wind howls and the crash and splash of the black ocean is so loud it makes me shudder.

Everything that used to be in this room has been pulled into The Gate – even parts of the floor and walls are now missing. I squint up to The Gate's corner that is closest to us and see the start of a shimmering line that stretches outwards to become a wide, jagged tear in The Fabric of Reality. "Let's begin there!" I shout. "Maybe the force of The Gate will be less at its edges."

Valiant struggles to stay upright against the pull of the wind, but energy surges through the wood and we soon reach the corner of The Gate.

"I'll hold the pestle while you sew!" Benjamin shouts.

A vine wraps around me as I lean out of the bowl to make the first stitch. It's difficult. Closing The Gate to the Past felt like sewing cotton or linen, but this feels like I'm trying to press the needle through thick, hard leather.

I lean further out of the bowl so I can press down on the needle harder. The wind flings my hair about my face, making it difficult to see, and whips my breath away from me. Finally the sharp point pierces something invisible and the thread slips through in its wake. *I've made the first stitch!*

“Let’s keep going sideways!” I prepare to make the next stitch, hoping that by weaving something of myself into the house and The Gate, it will help put everything back into balance.

Valiant surges sideways. But a sudden gust of wind pulls us closer towards The Gate. Valiant pulses with so much energy that the bowl of the mortar vibrates, shaking my whole body. Benjamin groans with effort as he tries to pull the pestle back, directing us away to safety. But it’s not enough and all at once, we’re tugged over the threshold into The Gate.

Silence and darkness envelop us. A memory of the last time I was here, looking for Baba, surges into my thoughts, along with a fresh wave of fear. “Pull back!” I shout, stabbing the needle into my sleeve for safekeeping and grabbing hold of the pestle too. “We can’t get lost in here!”

Benjamin and I pull back on the pestle with all our might.

Vines tighten around Valiant. They stretch and tremble as they tug us, and Valiant shudders with effort too.

“You can do this!” I shout. “*We* can do this! Think how strong we all are together!”

Valiant wobbles. The stars in the darkness flicker like fireflies. The black ocean surges below. I grip the pestle tighter, trying to fill Valiant with all the energy I have.

We swing around; a roaring wind hurts my ears, then there is silence again. We must be teetering right on the boundary between this world and the next.

“Come on, Valiant!” Benjamin shouts.

Valiant jerks backwards and once again the roar of the wind is all around us – we’re back in the house’s front room. My gaze darts around, searching for the shimmering line I need to keep stitching. “Up there!” I shout. It’s an arm’s length away. Valiant draws closer and I reach up and force the needle through again.

As I pull on the thread, I feel a weight on it. Worried it will snap, I slow down and ease the thread gently onwards.

The two stitches I’ve made finally tighten together, but I dare not celebrate when there is so much more to do. “Again!” I shout and Valiant flies a little further across The Gate.

I make another stitch, and another, and slowly The Gate becomes smaller. Despite the cold wind and the icy splashes from the black ocean, warm bubbles of hope expand in my chest.

“It’s working, Marinka!” Benjamin’s eyes light up with excitement.

Stitch after stitch, The Gate shrinks to less than half the size it was, revealing what little is left of the wall and the chimney breast behind it. The roar of the wind subsides and I hear Jack’s caws drifting down from the roof.

But then something pings above my head and another rush of wind whirls around us. I glance up and watch in horror as two more stitches come undone, revealing a long ellipse of starry darkness above us.

The darkness flies up the broken chimney breast as The Gate expands, then whooshes back down again on a gust of wind. Terror grips my heart as I glimpse a bundle of black feathers frantically flapping, trapped in the darkness. “Jack!” I cry.

Jack’s eyes flash like stars and he squawks in panic as he’s pulled into The Gate.

“Jack!” I shout again, dropping the needle to reach for him. But the vines and the mortar trap me in place. “No! Jack! We must get Jack!” I shout louder. But he zooms away so fast he’s out of sight before I finish speaking. “No!” I scream. “Jack!”

“Look!” Benjamin points to where some vines are reaching into The Gate. They are pulled taut, sliding deeper and deeper inside. “They must be trying to get Jack.”

I grab the vines and feel for any sign of movement that might be Jack. Winds rush around us. “Can you feel him, House? Bring him back. Please, bring him back,” I beg.

Another stitch pings open and The Gate expands again. “Hold the pestle steady, Marinka, I’ll get the needle!” Benjamin shouts. “We need to fix the broken stitches before The Gate opens further!”

I keep one hand on the vines, feeling for any sign of Jack, and put my other hand on the pestle. I feel torn. I want to climb down the vines into The Gate, find Jack and bring him home. But I also need to keep holding Valiant steady, so that Benjamin doesn’t get pulled into The Gate too.

Benjamin fights against the wind to reach the needle, which is blowing around on the end of the thread below us, then he struggles to push its sharp tip into the tough edge of the shimmering line. I want to help him, but I need to keep feeling for Jack. If the vines find him, they’ll need help pulling him out. I feel frozen in place, overwhelmed by fear.

My eyes ache from staring into the darkness and my heart thumps against my ribs. *I need him to come back.*

Benjamin does one stitch. Then another. He keeps sewing downwards, leaving part of The Gate above us open – the part that Jack disappeared into. I squeeze the vine in my hand, willing it to find Jack, sending it all the energy and hope that I can.

Valiant sinks towards the floor as Benjamin keeps stitching The Gate closed. The air grows calmer and the winds quieter, but I feel like the storm has moved inside me. *I can’t lose Jack!*

“Is there any sign of him yet?” Benjamin asks. He’s almost completely closed the lower part of The Gate.

“House, do you have him?” I ask, even though I know the answer. If the house had Jack, I would feel him in the vines now. I stare into the starry

darkness, thinking about how, when I went in there looking for Baba, I nearly lost myself. It was Benjamin's voice that called me home and Jack who saved me. I must save him now. There must be a way. *Maybe my voice will help?* I shout Jack's name into the darkness as loud as I can. I shout and shout from deep in my belly, over and over.

Benjamin finishes stitching the lower part of The Gate and Valiant flies closer to the open part. "Jack! Come home! This way!" I shout and Benjamin's voice joins my own.

"Jack!" he shouts. "This way!"

One of the vines stretched into The Gate twitches and hope flashes through me. Another vine curls over the first and both begin sliding out of the darkness.

Benjamin takes the pestle so I can use both hands to help pull the vines back. "Do you have him? You must have him! Is he all right?" My fingers tremble as, hand over hand, I tug the vines out of The Gate as fast as I can.

Finally, a bundle of black feathers emerges. Jack is tangled in the vines, sparkling with stardust. I carefully free him and pull him into my arms. He's cold and damp. I brush the water from the black ocean and the stardust from his feathers, although it looks like some of his feathers have been stained silver-white for good.

"Jack?" I whisper, but he doesn't answer. My heartbeat rises into my throat as I draw Jack close to my mouth. I blow warm breath across his beak and rub his chest until finally his heart flutters beneath my hands and his eyes flicker open. "Oh, Jack!" I cry in relief and hold him tight. Next to me, Benjamin gasps gratefully and then reaches out to make the last few stitches to close The Gate.

Benjamin ties the final knot and Valiant sinks to the floor. I climb out of the mortar with Jack in my arms and collapse onto the floorboards. My whole body trembles with the rush of all the emotions I've just felt and tears flood down my cheeks.

Benjamin climbs out of the mortar too and puts an arm around my shoulder. "We did it, Marinka," he says proudly. "The Gate is closed."

"The Gate is closed," I repeat, the words rippling through me like a warm wave. I look around the front room. It's empty and silent. Not a breath of wind remains. All of my, Baba's and Yaga Tatyana's things are gone, along with a few floorboards, beams and even a section of wall.

“Will the house regrow the parts it lost?” Benjamin asks, following my gaze.

“I hope so.” I picture some of the things the house can’t regrow – Baba’s cauldron, books and her old comfy chair… Sadness falls over me at their loss, but I try to shrug it off. They are only things. What is important is that the house and all of us are safe now.

I look up at the rafters and smile. “Benjamin’s right. We did it, House. We closed The Gate!” I turn to Benjamin and pull him into a hug. “Thank you! I couldn’t have done it without you. And you, Valiant.” I put a hand on the mortar’s bowl. “We couldn’t have done it without you either.”

Jack ruffles his feathers and looks up at us. His silver eyes are now surrounded by sparkling streaks, like the trails of shooting stars. He murmurs something that turns into a happy cackle and my smile widens. “It’s good to have you back. I was so worried about you.” I kiss the top of Jack’s feathery head. “You’re safe now.” I glance up at the rafters again. “And you, House. You’re safe too. I’m so relieved. I couldn’t bear the thought of losing you, but everything is all right now.”

The house’s vines curl around me and squeeze like they never want to let go. I sense the house’s relief, but also the heavy feeling again – the one something like sorrow. It sends a cold shiver of fear through me, but I push the feeling away. Nothing else can be wrong. Not now. “Everything is all right,” I repeat firmly, as I lift one of the vines to my face and kiss it too.

Moving On

“Shall we go to find Yaga Tatyana now?” Benjamin asks hopefully. “Then go home to my father?”

“Yes!” I nod eagerly. I can’t wait to return to them both and put their worries at ease. “Do you think Yaga Tatyana is still in her laboratory on the mountaintop?” I look up at the rafters questioningly. I’m not sure how she could have left, but now that I have time to think properly, I can’t quite imagine Yaga Tatyana sitting there for the last two nights waiting for us to return.

The house shrugs but rises to its feet, so I know it’s happy to begin the search there.

“Can we stop at a cabin on the way back through the forest?” I ask. “It’s near where you first fell. A man called Kolya lives there, who helped us when we were looking for the Water of Life.”

“We said we’d try to let him know we returned safely from Marzanna’s Garden.” Benjamin nods.

“There is something else I’d like to tell him too.” I smile at the thought. “The Gate to the Past showed me that Kolya and I are related.”

The roof curves into a smile and a warm, satisfied feeling radiates from the house’s walls.

“You knew!” I exclaim. “But how?”

The house does another small shrug, and I realize it didn’t know for sure about Kolya – it only hoped. I think about the memory the house shared of the first friend it made, hundreds of years ago. The cabin in the memory looked like it was in the same place as Kolya’s cabin. And the girl, the

house's friend, looked like me. An idea sparks into my mind that makes everything clear. "I'm descended from that first friend you made! Aren't I, House?"

The house nods and a vine curls down to my cheek.

"So you thought that I might have a relative in that part of the forest, but you weren't sure?"

The house nods again and I'm overcome by a warm feeling. I put my hand over the vine on my cheek and think of that first friend the house made, and me, and all the years in between. "It's like we have a bond that's lasted hundreds of years. We're family in more ways than I ever realized."

Jack ruffles his feathers and squawks. "You're family too, Jack. And Yaga Tatyana, and Benjamin." I glance to Benjamin. "And Benjamin's father. Family is everyone who loves and cares for you." Thinking about Yaga Tatyana and Benjamin's father makes me even more excited to set off and I know Benjamin feels the same. I adjust Jack in my arms and pull Gate Carver Antek's leather pouch from my apron pocket.

Benjamin carefully places the needle back inside the pouch. "What do you think we should do with this?"

The vine lifts from my cheek, curls around the pouch, carries it outside and places it back on the mantelpiece of the lonely fireplace.

"Are you sure we shouldn't keep the tools with us?" I bite my lip, worried that something else might go wrong with The Gate. "What if we need them again?"

"The letter was addressed *For the next Gate Carver,*" Benjamin says. "So I imagine the letter and the pouch need to stay here, ready for whoever that is."

The house curls its vines back inside and begins walking across the path just beneath the surface of the pink ocean. Benjamin and I move to the front porch. It's wonderful to be standing here again, looking in the direction the house is travelling, without feeling scared of being pulled into The Gate.

The sky is now a bright, deep green and round, blue clouds swim across it like jellyfish. We sit near the balustrade and Valiant hops over to my side. I shift Jack in my arms so I can pull the parcel of Kolya's biscuits from my apron pocket. Most of them have broken into crumbs, but I open the paper out between me and Benjamin so we can pick out the bigger pieces. I'm not sure what time it is in this strange Realm, or back in our own Realm for that matter, but I'm hungry, and feel like it must be somewhere near breakfast.

“When we get back to Yaga Tatyana, I’m going to ask how someone becomes a Gate Carver.” Benjamin’s eyes shine with curiosity.

“The other day you were nervous about starting a new school, but now you’re thinking about Gate Carving!” I smile.

“Everything we’ve done since the house ran away has made me realize I have more courage than I thought, and that it’s there for me when I need it. And what I saw in The Gate to the Soul helped me realize something too.”

Jack leans out of my arms, trying to reach the biscuits, and Benjamin passes him one of the largest chunks.

“In The Gate I saw myself,” Benjamin continues. “But I was made of hundreds of tiny birds, all fluttering their wings nervously. And that’s exactly how I feel when I think about moving school or making new friends. Or not being around you,” Benjamin adds quietly. “When I’m with you I feel happier, braver and more comfortable in myself somehow. That’s why I’ve been so worried about having to start somewhere new on my own.” Benjamin looks over to me shyly. “You’re the first real friend I’ve had, Marinka.”

“You’re the first real friend I’ve had too, and I think that’s something very special.” My cheeks warm. “The first friend you make outside of your family, who sees and likes you as you are…they help you see and like yourself as you are too. And I think that gives you a kind of confidence that you can carry with you, even when you aren’t by your friend’s side.”

I think about the bees buzzing in my chest and how I haven’t learned to like *every* part of myself, and perhaps I never will. But I do like myself more because of Benjamin, and he makes me want to be the best I can be too – the best kind of person and the best kind of friend.

“So what did seeing yourself as fluttering birds make you realize?” I ask.

“As I watched the birds and thought about how nervous I’ve been feeling, the birds’ wings fluttered faster and faster and all of a sudden they were flying – and I was flying!” Benjamin beams. “And I realized maybe my soul was trying to tell me that it’s all right to feel nervous. Maybe it’s even a kind of power that we can harness to help us fly.” Benjamin blushes. “Sorry, that probably doesn’t make any sense.”

“It does!” I nod encouragingly. “We only feel nervous when we care about something or feel it’s important or want to do well. So that is a kind of power we can harness.”

Benjamin smiles. “I think so. It made me realize that I do want to try the new school and do well there. The art department gives everyone the chance to try so many amazing things – ceramics and glass-blowing and stone-carving! And I know now that I can find the courage to try – thanks to you, Marinka, and the house, of course.” Benjamin glances up at the eaves and they smile down at him.

“That’s wonderful, Benjamin.” I smile too, although my heart aches a little. “I will miss you at school, of course. Nobody there knows me like you do – as living, dead and Yaga. But we’ll always be friends, and it will only make me happy to know you’re chasing your dream of becoming an artist.”

“Thanks, Marinka. What about you? Did The Gate to the Soul help you too?”

“I’m not sure yet,” I say. “I think I need more time to figure out what I saw.”

The house picks up pace and I glance back to the Gate Carver’s Island one last time, thinking about all we did there. We closed The Gate and saved the house, and now we’re heading to Kolya – a relative I didn’t even know I had – then to Yaga Tatyana and The Land of Lakes, where I have everything I ever dreamed of. So why do I still have an unsettled feeling, like something is missing from my life?

Running Again

The house strides over the pink ocean and I stare at the crescents of light playing on the waves, wondering why I feel so unsettled.

My thoughts turn to Baba, and the glimpse I saw of her in The Gate to the Past. At first, I smile at the memory of her, but – as usual – soon I am thinking of everything I should have done differently in those last days I had with her and the bees buzz in my chest.

Tears well in my eyes as my thoughts spiral into a terrible loop. I feel trapped by them, like that bee trapped in the jar that The Gate to the Soul showed me. I wonder if that's what it all meant – that my soul was trying to tell me that I'm trapping myself with all these thoughts, with everything I feel guilty and regretful for. If that was the message from my soul, then it isn't very useful. Guilt isn't as easy to release as a bee from a jar and I can't imagine ever not feeling this way. A tear escapes and trickles down my cheek, and I brush it away before Benjamin notices.

Valiant nudges me, pulling me from my thoughts, and I turn to see the mortar bouncing with excitement. "Do you want to fly?" I ask, grateful for the distraction. Valiant hops a few times then leans towards me.

"Do you want to come too?" I ask Benjamin but he shakes his head.

"I'll stay here if that's all right with you. Something else I've learned along the way is that flying doesn't agree with me."

I place Jack in Benjamin's arms before climbing into the mortar. Valiant swoops up to the house's eaves, then glides alongside them as the house splashes through the water below.

A vine reaches out and traces the path the tear trickled down my cheek then forms the shape of a question mark.

“I’m fine,” I lie, and the vine curls down to drum on my fingers impatiently. I know it won’t stop until I tell the house what’s on my mind, so I take a deep breath and try to find the words. “I saw Baba in The Gate to the Past,” I begin.

The vine stops tapping on my fingers and holds my hand instead.

“I can’t think of her without feeling guilty,” I whisper. “It was my fault that she left through The Gate. If I had done things differently, she would still be here.”

The vine tugs at Baba’s headscarf, still bandaging my wrist, then reaches up and gives me a hug.

“I know if Baba were here she would try to comfort me,” I reply. “She might even forgive me—”

The house interrupts me with a confident nod.

“That doesn’t help.” I shake my head. “Because I can’t forgive myself. I acted so selfishly. I did and said so many awful things.”

Another vine reaches out to touch my chest near my heart. A small white flower blooms on the vine, followed by another, and another, until a long line of fragrant blossoms are dancing on the vine. They brush my cheek and I instantly feel what the house is trying to tell me.

“You think that I’ve changed?” I ask. I don’t understand why the house would think that, or why it matters.

Glowing memories drift from beneath the house’s eaves and pop around my face. They are all recent, from the last couple of days. I see myself patiently and calmly guiding Anna through The Gate. Then I watch myself chase the house after The Gate exploded, and I feel how touched the house was by my determination to stay with it and help it.

I thought the house was asleep when Benjamin and I flew in Valiant and returned with the Water of Life, but the house shares a memory of how brave, kind and generous it thought we were for trying to heal it in this way.

The vine lifts my chin and I know the house is telling me that it feels proud of me and that it wishes I felt proud too. A lump forms in my throat. “Perhaps I have changed a little, House, but I can’t feel proud. There are too many things I’ve done that I will always regret.”

The flowers on the vine drop their petals and berries swell in their place. Once again, I feel what the house is trying to tell me. “You think that I’ve

changed *because* of the past – because of my mistakes."

The house nods and flowers erupt all over its roof. A small smile grows on my face. It helps to see everything in this new way. Perhaps what is more important than forgiving my mistakes is learning from them. And perhaps it's not guilt and regret that are trapping me, but how I think about them. Instead of becoming upset by these feelings and trying to suppress them, hide them or fight them, maybe I need to use them.

I think about what Benjamin saw in The Gate to the Soul, and how it helped him accept his nervousness and even see it as a power. Perhaps, if I can accept my regrets, I can use them as a power too – to help me grow and change for the better.

My soul showed me that once the bee in the jar was free, it transformed into a huge glowing bird with fiery feathers. I realize now that my soul was telling me that my bees can help me become something more, if I let them.

"I have grown and changed because of the past." I lift my chin higher and look over to the house. "And I will keep on doing that every day. I will make myself proud." As my words rise into the air, a calmness settles inside me and I realize that by accepting every part of myself, I no longer feel that anything is missing from my life.

The house smiles with its eaves, then suddenly speeds into a run. Valiant rushes after it, so fast that I feel like a bird taking flight.

Water splashes up from the house's feet as it surges ahead, leaving me and Valiant trailing behind. "The house wants to race!" I shout to Valiant and lean on the pestle. We accelerate quickly and almost catch up with the back porch.

The house leaps into the air and when it lands a huge wave of sparkling pink water crashes over me and Valiant with such force we are thrown downwards, towards the ocean. Valiant rises, spinning to shake the water off, while the house speeds ahead once more.

"That's not fair!" I call after the house as we race back towards it. This time Valiant manages to catch up with the house and we fly over its roof. The puddles of starry darkness that marked it when The Gate was out of control are completely gone, the tiles covered by moss and flowers.

I wave down to Benjamin and Jack, who are sitting on the front porch. But then Valiant passes the crumpled chimney and it lets out a plume of sooty ash that blocks our view. Valiant slows and the house chuckles as it takes the lead again.

I scream with a mixture of excitement and fright as Valiant flings us out of the sooty cloud and surges forwards again, zooming after the house. We race all the way to the end of the path, where the house leaps into the pink ocean with a triumphant splash.

"You win, House!" I shout as Valiant drifts down to where the house is now swimming in the water.

We land beside Benjamin, who is beaded with shining water droplets from when the house jumped into the water. "It was so good to see the house running again!" Benjamin smiles and I nod in agreement.

"It was! And do you know what else?" I say with excitement. "The house helped me figure out what I saw in The Gate to the Soul too. I've been unsettled because of these bees in my chest."

Benjamin looks at me in confusion, but my words carry on rushing out.

"I needed to accept every part of me – even my guilt and regrets – because even the things that I'm not proud of I can use to help me grow. That's what's been missing from my life – a feeling of being comfortable with myself – and now that I've found it, I know that I can feel settled wherever I am."

Benjamin smiles. "I'm glad you figured it out, Marinka."

"Just like closing The Gate, I couldn't have done it without all of you." I glance from Benjamin and Jack to Valiant and the house, thinking how all of them, by accepting and loving me as I am, have helped me to accept and love who I am too.

The house swims through the water and into the cavern, then walks back through the cave. Once again my ears pop and this time I know it's because we've passed through a doorway – a Gate – back into our own Realm. I decide that when we're safely back with Yaga Tatyana I'll ask her about Gates and Realms and, this time, listen without being distracted.

When we finally emerge from the cave, the forest is bathed in dawn light. Sunbeams illuminate the morning mist and new spring leaves and I think how beautiful it all is, and how my ancestors lived here and likely thought the same thing. A flush of warmth radiates through me. It's a new and

wonderful feeling to be in a place and know that my ancestors called it home.

The house continues westwards towards Kolya's cabin, and I look out across the forest, daydreaming about how I'll explain to him that I know he's my great-uncle. But soon I become distracted by the house's walk. Its pace is uneven and the house is tilting to one side.

Worry falls over me. "Are you all right, House?" I ask.

A vine reaches down to my shoulder, but then slides to the floor as if too tired to hold onto me. Each step becomes more of a struggle.

"What's going on?" Benjamin asks, his face paling.

The sound of wood splintering fills me with dread. I lean over the balustrade, trying to work out what's happening.

The house's legs are covered with cracks. The wood looks old and dry, and with each step it is splintering more. "House? What's wrong?" My voice wavers.

Jack climbs onto the balustrade and paces along it anxiously. Then he shrieks as the house collapses.

I grip Benjamin and the balustrade and manage to stop us from sliding off the porch as the house crumples to the ground. Its legs fold awkwardly beneath it and an exhausted puff of soot floats up from the chimney.

I scramble down from the porch and look up at the house, feeling cold. I haven't seen the house look so tired and cracked since after Baba left. Then, it was because I wasn't guiding the dead, so the house wasn't able to get the energy it needed from The Gate.

The truth crashes over me like an icy wave. "This is because The Gate is closed, isn't it?"

The house gives me a small nod and I groan with frustration. "Why did you make me leave the Gate Carving tools behind? I could have opened The Gate again, to give you more energy!" My mind reaches for another solution. "We'll have to do a guiding then! Benjamin and I can see what food is in the pantry, build the bone fence and light the candles in the skulls. The dead will come, then The Gate will open…" My voice trails off as the house shakes from side-to-side and looks at me, sorrowfully and apologetically.

Fear prickles over my skin. My stomach feels tight and heavy as a rock. The house is trying to tell me that The Gate won't open again. But if that is true, then I don't want to think about what that means for the house.

Running Out of Time

“There must be a way to open The Gate again so you can get the energy you need. We’ve come this far, House, we’re not giving up now!”

The house reaches out one of its clawed toes and gently nudges me away.

I grab the toe with both hands and shake my head. “Don’t push me away! I’m here to help. We’re all here to help.” I glance over to Benjamin, Jack and Valiant. “There must be something we can do.”

The house nudges me away again and this time, as I turn, I notice a thin line of smoke rising above the trees into the early morning sky. I crane my neck to see where it is coming from and glimpse a familiar rooftop. “Kolya’s cabin!” I exclaim. “You got us here! Maybe he can help?” I suggest desperately.

“I’ll get him!” Benjamin runs down the porch steps two at a time and disappears between the trees.

The house lets out a long, heavy sigh. The walls slump and the crumpled chimney pot slides down from the roof and crashes to the ground. I stare at it in shock. The house’s chimney has always been crooked, and I know it had partially collapsed, but I never thought it would actually fall off the house completely.

Jack swoops down from the balustrade, picks up one of the smallest pieces of chimney pot and carries it back onto the roof. I watch in despair as Jack does this again and again. My thoughts whirl, reaching for ideas to help the house, but they are as hopeless as Jack’s attempts to rebuild the chimney.

“Marinka?” Kolya’s voice drifts through the trees, and I turn to see him emerge with Benjamin. My heart swells at the sight of his kind, wrinkled face and scruffy grey hair and beard. I want to rush to him and tell him that he’s my great-uncle, and ask him how we can help the house, but he looks shocked enough already.

“It’s a house with chicken legs.” Kolya takes a shuffling step beside me. He has a bewildered expression, but wonder and admiration shine in his grey eyes too. “My wife, Anna, told a few stories about houses with chicken legs, but I never realized—”

“Were any of Anna’s stories about the houses becoming ill or old, or needing help?” I ask urgently.

“I’m afraid not, Marinka.” Kolya shakes his head sadly. “So this is the loved one you needed the Water of Life for?”

“Yes, and we got the water and it helped fix the house’s leg – it was broken – but it didn’t fix everything. So we tried something else, but now I think that’s made everything worse.” I pause and take a shuddering breath. I feel myself losing control of my emotions and the words pouring from my mouth. “Without The Gate the house can’t get the energy it needs and I think it’s… The house is…” I stare at the slumping walls, the downturned eaves, the closed shutters. “I’m worried that…” I put a hand over my mouth, but a sob escapes anyway. “The house is my family, Kolya. I need to figure out how to help it.”

“I wish I knew what to do,” Kolya says thoughtfully. “Is there anyone else you know who might be able to help?”

“You’re the only person we know in this forest, or anywhere near here,” Benjamin replies.

“Yaga Tatyana is far away, across an ocean.” Another sob rises in my throat. “We’d never reach her in time, even if we flew in Valiant. And I don’t know where any of the other Yaga are or how to reach them.”

“What’s that?” Kolya asks. I follow his gaze to a small glowing light drifting out from beneath the house’s eaves.

“It’s one of the house’s memories.” I close my eyes and reach up to touch it. An image fizzes into my mind of the house when it was very young, curled up amongst the enchanted tree’s roots. The house felt warm, safe and protected. “The house is sharing a memory of itself with the enchanted tree that it grew from, hundreds of years ago.”

“Could the tree help?” Kolya asks.

“Could it?” I look up at the house, tiny bubbles of hope rising from my belly. “Do you know where the tree is, House?”

The house looks thoughtful for a moment. I think it’s about to respond, but then it sighs with exhaustion and drifts into sleep.

“There is a story I’ve heard about an enchanted tree,” Kolya offers.

“Another of Anna’s tales?” Benjamin asks.

“No. This is a story told to me by the people who live in the nearest village.” Kolya nods southwards and I think of the village Benjamin and I saw on the bank of a river when we took our first flight with Valiant. “A healer lives at the edge of the village with her daughter, Yanka. Last year, Yanka went on an adventure through this forest to find an enchanted tree. She wanted to make a wish, or break a curse, if I remember right.”

“Did she find the tree?” I ask eagerly. “Was it far away?”

Kolya nods. “The tree was in The Far North, many days’ travel from here.”

I let out an exasperated groan. “The house doesn’t have the energy for many days’ travel.”

“But there’s more to the story,” Kolya rushes in. “The villagers told me that Yanka brought the tree back with her.”

“How can anyone carry a tree across a forest?” Benjamin asks.

“Well, the story is a little fantastic there. I was told that Yanka had the help of a bear. But whether you believe the story or not, the fact is that an incredibly beautiful, mature lime tree now grows where Yanka’s garden meets the forest and there wasn’t one there before. If an enchanted tree exists, I’d say that is one.”

The bubbles of hope inside me swell. “How far away is Yanka’s garden?”

“Not far at all.” Kolya looks at the house’s chicken legs. “If your house is able to walk, we could get there in less than half an hour perhaps.”

I step close to the house’s nearest foot and put a hand on it. “Could you try, House? If the tree gave you life, perhaps it could help you now.”

The house stirs and strains to straighten its walls and legs.

“Will you come with us?” I ask Kolya over the awful sound of splintering. “To show us the way?”

“Of course.” Kolya nods and I take his hand. His skin is rough like the house’s oldest vines and warm like my horsehair blanket. My heart swells again with the thought that Kolya is family, and I guide him up onto the

porch. Benjamin follows and we stand beside Valiant while the house slowly rises to its feet.

“Come on, Jack,” I call. He is still trying to carry the broken chimney back onto the roof, piece by piece. He flies over to sit on the balustrade near me, but stares mournfully at the parts of the chimney that he couldn’t save. “It’s all right.” I try to comfort him with a gentle stroke. “The house will grow a new chimney when it’s better,” I whisper, hoping that’s true.

More cracking and splintering sounds fill the air and finally the house stands tall. But it’s only for the briefest moment. The house feels suddenly cold. It wobbles and tilts to one side, further and further.

“The house is going to fall!” Benjamin grabs Kolya’s arm and the balustrade.

My heartbeat accelerates. I move quickly, by instinct, stepping into the mortar and putting my hand on the pestle. I feel our connection straight away and know that Valiant understands my plan.

We rise to the house’s eaves, where I lean out of the mortar’s bowl and scoop as many of the house’s vines into my arms as I can. They feel limp and lifeless, but at least they aren’t crumbling like the house’s walls. I wrap them around Valiant and tie them firmly together, then Valiant flies in the opposite direction to the way the house is leaning.

I hold my breath, willing this to work. The vines pull taut. I stare at where they grow from the eaves, hoping they won’t come loose. But they remain firmly attached as the house is pulled back upright.

“Well done!” Benjamin shouts encouragement from the porch.

“Yes, well done!” Kolya echoes, but his knuckles are white as he holds on to the house’s balustrade. I suddenly feel guilty for asking him to come along. If the house does fall, it would be awful if Kolya – or anyone else – got hurt. “Keep going south!” Kolya calls and the house takes a lurching step forward.

Once again, the house leans sideways and once again Valiant tugs it back upright. “We’re going to make it, House!” I shout. “We can do this!”

Jack squawks in agreement as he flies up and circles the house’s roof.

Step by wobbling step, we head south through the forest. I stare ahead, willing us onwards. I hope we find the enchanted tree soon and I hope it can help. Because I have an awful feeling this is the last chance we have to save the house.

The Enchanted Tree

The house struggles through the forest, leaning more with each step. Its legs shake and I know it wants to stop and rest. My heart aches for it, but we need to keep going.

Valiant keeps tugging the house onwards, but soon begins struggling with the effort. Fear tightens around me that we won't make it to the enchanted tree or the house will fall and… I urge Valiant and the house on as Benjamin and Kolya shout encouragement from the porch and Jack flies ahead.

Soon a tree appears that takes my breath away. It's enormous, with a trunk so broad that all the guests at a party for the dead couldn't link arms around it, and it's taller than the house with its legs fully extended. And it's so leafy! Millions of bright-green leaves shiver and shimmer in the sunlight, in deep contrast to the dark, still pines around it. While all the forest only just seems to be waking from winter, the enchanted tree is as vibrant as the richest spring in full swing. I smile. A tree so full of life must surely be able to help the house.

"This is it!" I shout. "This must be the enchanted tree! We're here!"

The house takes one last faltering step and the vines wrapped around Valiant pull us back onto the porch. Then the house collapses beside the tree with a great sigh.

Immediately the tree leans over, opens its branches like arms and envelops the house in an embrace. Surprise flashes through me and goosebumps rise on my flesh as the leaves gather around the house and glow brighter. My whole body tingles with hope.

The house rests against the tree’s trunk and its legs fold among the roots. I think of the memory the house shared with me of when it was young, curled up beside the tree, feeling warm, safe and protected.

Vines lift me out of the mortar, and more vines wrap around Benjamin and Kolya. As they lift Kolya I hear him laugh for the first time. It's a deep, joyful sound, like the thump of a Yaga house's dancing feet. The vines place us all side by side at the bottom of the porch steps and Jack swoops down and lands on my shoulder.

We watch in silent awe, anticipation sparkling in the air, as the leafy branches curl around the house, glowing. Where they touch the house, the cracks and splinters disappear and the wood shines as bright and glossy as the tree's trunk.

"It's working! The house is healing!" I grasp Benjamin's and Kolya's hands and bounce on my toes in excitement.

Jack caws triumphantly and takes off for a victory lap of the house. He returns to land on the house's balustrade and nuzzles his head affectionately against the wood. A spindle reaches up to give him a stroke. As it does, small buds appear along it that unfurl into small, shining leaves. Jack caws again, this time more solemnly, then he flies back to my shoulder.

I stop bouncing on my toes and stare at the house. A frown of concern deepens on my brow. The house is glowing, vibrant and full of health like the tree, but the leaves now sprouting along the balustrade are making me feel apprehensive.

The house takes a deep breath of satisfaction that makes me feel more at ease. I step towards it, and a vine curls down and rests against my cheek. I put my hand over it. "Is that better, House? Do you feel well again?"

The eaves smile and the house closes its shutters. More branches curve over the house and leaves unfurl along them. But I frown again as I realize these branches are growing from the house itself, not bending down from the tree. The mossy roof tiles are growing a canopy of their own. The houses' walls are merging with the tree's trunk. And the house's long clawed toes are reaching into the ground, like roots.

My head shakes. I press the vine to my cheek tighter and open my mouth, but no words will come out. I watch in dismay as one of the house's feet disappears into the ground completely. I look up again and the house and the tree have become so entangled I can't see where one ends and the other begins.

Finally, words burst out of my mouth. "Stop! Wait! This isn't right! This isn't supposed to happen!" All my hope, wonder and excitement turn into panic. I rush towards the house, heart racing, but there is no way in. The

porch has shrunk back to the house's walls. And the door and windows are fading away.

"Valiant!" I shout as I spot the mortar and pestle tangled in branches against what could either be a wall of the house or the tree's trunk. Valiant nods to me in what feels like a proud farewell, then relaxes happily into the branches enfolding it.

"No!" I pat the vine embracing my cheek over and over. "House!" I glance back to Benjamin and Kolya in desperation. "They are merging! The house, the tree and Valiant, they are all becoming one! We must stop this!" But Benjamin and Kolya look as helpless as I feel.

The vine twitches against my cheek and I turn back to the house. "Please, House! Stop this! Come back to me!"

Finally, a shutter creaks open and the house looks at me calmly. A sparrow flits in the leaves above the window. The vine slides down and wraps around my shoulders in a warm hug.

A glistening memory drifts from the eaves and hovers in front of my face. I somehow know that this is one of the house's most treasured memories. I reach up to it, then close my eyes as it fizzes into my thoughts.

In my mind, I see the front room of the house, filled with Baba's things. The Gate is open, but there are no dead waiting to be guided and Baba is nowhere to be seen. I think how strange it is for The Gate to be open but no guiding happening.

Stars twinkle in the blackness inside The Gate. I feel the house waiting for something, worrying. I gasp as I realize what this memory might be and I search the blackness, looking for confirmation. Then I see her! *Baba!* She is inside The Gate, struggling towards the cosy warmth of the house, pushing her way past thick swirls of stardust and gusts of cosmic winds.

Finally she reaches the house, crawls inside and collapses onto the wooden floor, exhausted. The house exhales with relief, then starts at the sound of a baby's cry. I cover my mouth as a giggle erupts. I know this baby is me. This is how I came to live with Baba in the house.

Baba turns and sees me, as a baby, wrapped in my horsehair blanket, clinging on tight to her shawl. She shakes her head and sighs as she scoops me into her arms, but there is a warm smile growing on her face. "Well, House." Baba glances up at the rafters. "I don't have the energy to take her to the stars again. The stubborn child refuses to go forward to the land of the dead and she can't go back to the land of the living." Baba looks down

at my cheery smile. “So, House, how do you feel about our family of two becoming a family of three?”

A vine curls down from the rafters and tenderly caresses the baby girl’s face. Then a faint glow of starlight flows from the vine, lighting up the baby’s skin. The baby giggles, grabs the vine and tries to pull it into her mouth.

Baba gently untangles the vine from the baby’s fingers. “Marinka,” she says softly. “Welcome to your new home. Welcome to your new family.”

Tears well in my eyes as the memory fades away. Another vine descends and drapes my horsehair blanket over my shoulders, and I take a deep breath to steady my emotions as this vine retreats into what is left of the eaves. More lights flash around me, as if asking for my attention. Memories cascade down and crowd around me. There are so many of them, too many to count, like stars in the sky.

The memories fizz into me, one after another, fleeting glimpses of times the house has spent with me that it treasured. My first steps. My first dance with the dead. The first time I built the skull-and-bone fence all by myself, and the first time I read the house a story from *The Book of Yaga*.

The games we played together: hide-and-seek, tag, growing make-believe worlds. And the time I found Jack as an orphaned chick, and figured out how to feed and care for him.

My first swim, after being overenthusiastically kicked into the water by one of the house’s great chicken feet. I never realized how sorry the house felt for doing that and I feel awful now for being so cross with it afterwards.

The vine still around me hugs me tighter and I know the house is saying that it’s fine. That sometimes we got things right and sometimes we got them wrong. But there was always love.

The house shares a memory of some of Baba’s last words. She is holding my hands tight, moments before I know she will step into The Gate. She looks at me and tells me that I’m clever, stubborn and fiery. But there is nothing but love in her eyes and a smile on her face. I suddenly realize how much Baba loved me, truly and unconditionally. The parts of myself that I often think of as flaws – my stubbornness, my temper – she saw as strengths. Where I see my best and my worst, Baba only ever saw Marinka.

Baba tells me I will be fine. She says she has faith in me. Then she steps into the darkness and the memory fades away. I realize the house is trying

to tell me that it has faith in me too, and that it also believes I will be fine, but before I can respond another memory rushes into me.

It's the first time I guided the dead alone. More and more memories swirl around me. I glimpse myself sitting on the house's roof in The Land of Snow, telling the house that I want a different destiny. I feel the house's fear when it lets me step through The Gate to look for Baba in the stars. And I feel its sorrow as it comforts me when I return without her.

I feel the house's pride when I return from my first day of school in The Land of Lakes. And its excitement as we race across The Steppes with a thunder of Yaga houses all around us.

I feel overwhelmed. I can no longer see the house through the light of all these memories. And there isn't enough time to look at them all. Not now. But I know them. These are all memories we share. I understand what the house is trying to do and tears flow down my cheeks.

"I will remember, House!" I shout, hugging the vine around me tight. "I will remember. I promise, I will remember you and Baba and everything we did together. All the love and all the life."

The memories fade away and finally I see the house again, although it is barely distinguishable from the enchanted tree. The vine around me loosens and I know it's about to let me go.

I choke on a wave of emotion. My chest curves inwards and I grasp the vine so tight my hands hurt. "Please don't go," I whisper. "Please don't go, House."

The vine wraps around my fingers and thrums with warmth. I look down and see a faint glow of starlight flowing from it, lighting up my skin. It's the same starlight that appears in The Gate and I suddenly know what I must do. And even though it's something I would never, ever want to do, I straighten my spine and take a deep breath. Then I try to speak the words clearly and calmly, as they are meant to be said, because the house deserves a proper ceremony.

"*May you have strength on the long and arduous journey ahead*," I begin slowly, and more starlight appears, glistening along the boundary where the house and the tree are merging.

"*The stars are calling for you*," I continue, my voice steadier than I feel inside. "*Move on with gratitude for your time on Earth. Every moment now an eternity. You carry with you memories of infinite value…*" I pause and

look at the house. It nods and I know what it will carry with it to the stars. "*The love of your family. Peace at—*"

A loud rumble interrupts my words. The ground shakes and Jack flaps into the air, squawking.

"I know that sound." My heart beats in time with the approaching booms.

"What is it?" Kolya asks, turning around to stare into the forest behind us.

I follow his gaze and my heart swells when I see another house with chicken legs step into view. It's followed by another, and another, until at least a dozen houses with chicken legs surround us in a half circle.

Yaga stand on their porches, heads held high as they look at my house and the tree. I see Yaga Tatyana with her old friend Yaga Onekin on one side and Benjamin's father on the other. They nod to me compassionately and I realize they are all here to say goodbye to the house too.

Yaga Tatyana walks down the porch steps of Yaga Onekin's house, across the forest floor and stands beside me. She holds my hand and looks at the house and the tree with tears in her eyes. "I love you, my friend," she whispers. "Thank you for all the lifetimes." Then she squeezes my hand encouragingly. "Go on, Yaga Marinka. It is time to say goodbye."

Jack alights on my shoulder and caws loudly.

I turn back to the house and swallow hard. The vine in my hand is thinning, slipping away from me.

"*You carry with you memories of infinite value*," I say again, my voice lifting and circling the house and the tree, and all the Yaga houses around us. "*The love of your family*."

The vine thins until it feels as insubstantial as spider silk. I let it go and it drifts back to the tree, glistening with starlight.

"*Peace at returning to the stars. The great cycle is complete*."

A heavy silence falls around me. I close my eyes and take another deep breath. Slowly, the sound of leaves rustling fills the silence. I wait for a long time, feeling the warm comfort of Yaga Tatyana's hand in mine. But finally, I know I must open my eyes and face what I will see.

In front of me there is only the tree. The house, our house with chicken legs, is gone.

Endings

The rest of the day is a blur. I remember Kolya tentatively putting an arm around my shoulders and Benjamin pulling me into a hug. Then Yaga Tatyana ushering us all into Yaga Onekin's house.

Yaga Onekin had laid out food and drinks, and Yaga Tatyana encouraged me to spoon *kasha* into my mouth even though I didn't feel like it. Yaga drifted in and out, paying their respects, telling us of their fondness for our house. Everything felt like a dream I kept hoping to wake from.

At some point, Yaga Tatyana helped me into a warm, clean nightshirt and tucked me into this cosy bed and I fell asleep with Jack at my side, listening to the low murmurs of conversation in the next room.

I woke, not long ago, to pale morning sunlight filtering through a small, round window beside me. Jack, curled beneath my chin, mutters something sleepily and it takes me a few moments to remember where we are and how we got here.

It hits me like a blow to the chest: I'm in Yaga Onekin's house and my house is gone. I sit up and gasp for air, look out of the window and see the enchanted tree.

I wait for another whirlwind of emotions to swirl into me. But the sight of the tree's leaves, shimmering pale gold and green as they sway in a gentle breeze, only fills me with a welcome tranquillity.

I slide my legs out of bed, overcome with the urge to go and stand beneath the tree's boughs. Yaga Tatyana has left one of her shawls on my bed, so I pull it over my shoulders, Jack clambers up, and we creep out of Yaga Onekin's sleepy house.

Yaga Tatyana is on the porch, cradling a mug full of tea that looks like it went cold hours ago. Her eyes are heavy with lack of sleep, but she smiles when she sees me and beckons me to sit beside her.

"Marinka," she says gently.

I hug her tight, not knowing what else to do, and breathe in her familiar, comforting scent of fireworks and the spices she uses to make spirit *trost*. Slowly questions fill my mind as I remember how I left Yaga Tatyana in her broken laboratory on a faraway mountaintop. "How did you get here?" I ask. "And how did you know to come here, at exactly that time yesterday?"

"When The Gate exploded it sent ripples through all The Gates of all the Yaga houses. Nobody understood what was happening at first, and I was lucky that Yaga Onekin managed to find me." Yaga Tatyana points up to the roof and for the first time I notice that her laboratory is balanced rather crookedly on top of Yaga Onekin's house.

"Oh my!" I stare at the laboratory, marvelling at what a feat it must have been for Yaga Onekin's house to lift the laboratory onto its roof and carry it all this way. "Is it…does it have any…" I struggle to find the right words.

"There is no life left in it." Yaga Tatyana shakes her head and looks over to the tree. Her eyes glisten with tears. "Everything that was your house – and my house – is now part of the enchanted tree." Yaga Tatyana puts her hand over her heart. "I know how painful saying goodbye to your house was. Yet you spoke the death journey words beautifully, Marinka. I felt the house's pride in you."

I blink back tears as I lose the last flicker of hope that something of my house might have been left in Yaga Tatyana's laboratory. "I'm glad you got here in time to say goodbye."

"Me too." Yaga Tatyana nods. "We nearly didn't. After Yaga Onekin found me, we decided to get Benjamin's father, as we knew how worried he would be. Then it was difficult to figure out exactly where you were, because the ripples coming from your house's Gate were so confusing. And the night before last, they stopped completely."

"That must have been when Benjamin and I closed The Gate," I explain. "We sewed it shut with Gate Carver Antek's tools. I thought it would help…"

"It did help." Yaga Tatyana nods. "The Gate was unstable and needed to be closed. If you hadn't, it would have kept growing and become more dangerous. You did well, Marinka."

“It doesn’t feel like I did well. I couldn’t save the house.”

Jack nuzzles against my neck comfortingly.

“You did everything you could, Marinka. Your house lived a long and wonderful life, and it was time for it to move on. There is even a younger house ready to take over its responsibilities as a guiding house now.”

“I thought the enchanted tree would save it,” I say quietly.

“The enchanted tree called it home. And because the tree is connected to all of the Yaga houses, that calling rippled through all The Gates like nothing I’ve ever heard before. It was like a song. That’s how we finally knew where to come to find you. It’s how all the Yaga houses knew where to come.” Yaga Tatyana lifts my chin and looks into my eyes. “What happened yesterday was a very special thing, Marinka. You couldn’t have done anything to save your house. But you helped it find the best place to rest at the end, where it was comfortable and surrounded by love. And you spoke the death journey words yourself, from your heart, with courage and tenderness. It was the perfect way to begin a journey to the stars. You should be proud.”

“Do you think the house knew what would happen when I brought it to the tree?” I ask.

“Absolutely.” Yaga Tatyana nods. “I think the house knew for a while that its time was coming. And I think that it ran to this forest hoping to find Gate Carver Antek to close The Gate, and maybe even to find the tree. And perhaps – once you caught up with the house – it decided to look for something else too.”

“What?” I ask curiously.

“Kolya is asleep in there.” Yaga Tatyana nods to the living room window. “He’s a kind man, Marinka, and I see he cares for you. You remind him of his family. And I’ve been sitting here this morning thinking that perhaps you *are* his family?” Yaga Tatyana lifts her eyebrows in a question.

“He’s my great-uncle! But how did you know?” I ask. “The house knew my ancestors lived in this forest, but even it wasn’t sure I would still have family here!”

Yaga Tatyana smiles. “When you get to my age you learn to piece together even the tiniest clues with a little intuition. Yaga houses always have a reason for doing things, so I knew there must be a reason your house helped connect you and Kolya now. I think it hoped to show you that you

had more family before it left. And I imagine the house felt comforted when it did that."

"It is wonderful to know where my ancestors lived and to know I have family here." I nod. "But the house and Baba, and you and Benjamin, you are my family and you have always been enough."

"And we will always be your family, Marinka." Yaga Tatyana pulls me into another hug. "No matter how big your family grows, we will always be a part of it too."

The door creaks open and Benjamin appears with a tray of steaming mugs. "I hope I'm not interrupting you?" he asks shyly.

I shake my head. "Come and sit with us."

"I'm so sorry about your house, Marinka." Benjamin's eyes are red and damp with tears. "And I know it's early for you to be thinking about the future, but my father and I wanted you to know that you have a home with us, always. And you too, of course, Yaga Tatyana."

"Thank you, Benjamin." Yaga Tatyana smiles. "That is very kind of you both."

"Yes, thank you," I echo, although I can't imagine living anywhere that is not my house. "And thank you for being here," I add. "On this journey with me, and for everything you've done to help."

Benjamin passes me a couple of pieces of paper that I recognize as being from his sketchbook. "These are for you, if you'd like them," he says.

I take the papers from Benjamin and stare at the now finished drawings on them with tears in my eyes. "These are beautiful," I whisper. The first drawing is of us flying over the forest in Valiant, and the second one is the house, swimming through the moonlit ocean. "I love them, Benjamin. Thank you." I hug him close, grateful for the drawings, but also thinking how nothing will ever be the same again.

All of a sudden, my chest feels tight and heavy. I rise to my feet. "I need a moment alone with the tree, if that's all right."

Yaga Tatyana and Benjamin nod and I step off the porch. I glimpse a small cabin beyond the tree and stop still as I remember that Kolya said a healer and her daughter live close by.

"I spoke to the people who live there yesterday," Yaga Tatyana says, answering my question before it has formed on my tongue. "Yanka and her *mamochka*. They are lovely and very understanding. They are going to give

you all the time and space you need, but look forward to meeting you when you are ready."

"Thank you." I wander over to the tree, comforted by the knowledge that I won't be interrupted. Jack flies ahead and alights on one of the low branches.

I step beneath the boughs and look up at the tree, searching its wide trunk and shimmering canopy for any sign of my house. But there is nothing. I close my eyes and listen to the whispering leaves and the chirp of birds amongst them, hoping to hear the familiar creak or groan of my house's wood. But again, nothing.

I sit down amongst the roots and lean against the glistening bark. It's warm, thrumming with life, and I think perhaps there is something familiar about the feeling that swells inside me. I tip my head back and close my eyes again and imagine that I am sat on the house's porch…and I can almost feel its balustrade wrapping around me.

Jack squawks, making me jump. As I flinch forwards, something catches my borrowed shawl and I realize there are branches hugging me! I turn to the tree and see several thin branches have grown around the spot I was leaning against. Buds appear on them and I watch, mesmerized, as a few unfurl into shining new leaves.

Three of the buds are different from the others though – rounder and darker. I wonder if they are flower buds and I peer closer as they swell to the size of a large blueberry. Something shifts inside one of them and I glimpse what looks like a tiny bird foot, no bigger than my little fingernail.

I hold my breath and stare, unblinking, hoping for another glimpse.

Something moves inside one of the other buds. I see a minute chimney pot and another foot, with tiny clawed toes. Then a minuscule closed window and an almost imperceptible porch.

"Yaga Tatyana! Benjamin!" I shout at the top of my lungs, my heart racing. "Come quick! The tree is growing baby houses!"

Beginnings

Almost three months have passed since the buds appeared on the enchanted tree. They are as big as my palm now, but the houses inside them have not emerged. I feel sure it will happen soon though, so I spend every spare moment I can sitting beneath the tree, watching and waiting.

The buds have become darker and tougher, making it more difficult to see inside, but I get occasional glimpses of the houses. So I know they are all different, but each has something that reminds me of my house. One has a crooked chimney. Another has a wrap-around porch with a miniature balustrade. And one has shuttered front windows and eaves that move in the same way as my house's used to.

I'm excited for the young houses to break free of their buds, but also nervous. Yaga Tatyana says baby houses with chicken legs have always been able to take care of themselves, but I'm worried they might get hurt somehow when they are so small, or that I might do something wrong to scare or upset them, or that they might run off into the forest before I ever get the chance to know them.

Whatever happens though, I am glad I listened to my heart and chose to stay here. It has become much easier to trust what my heart tells me since I learned to accept and love myself for who I am. And the moment I saw the tiny houses, I knew I wanted to stay close, to watch them grow for as long as I could and offer care or comfort if ever they need it.

The only difficult part of the decision was leaving Benjamin and his father, but they understood. Benjamin's father said he loved having me close for a while, but that life is about moving on when you need to. And

Benjamin said that although he will miss me, he is excited for my future here – just like although I will miss him, I am excited for his future at the new school he has finally decided to try.

It makes me happy to think of Benjamin making new friends and new types of art. And he said it makes him happy to think of me with a whole forest to explore, new friends to make and young houses with chicken legs at my side.

These past few months, it's been wonderful watching the houses grow in the buds. And I've been enjoying growing a new life for myself here too. It turns out that the forest is as enchanted as the tree, and the people who live in the village nearby are so full of magical tales that I don't need to hide any part of who I am – living, dead or Yaga. Everyone has accepted and welcomed me, Yaga Tatyana and Jack with warm smiles and open arms.

Yaga Tatyana and I chose a place for our new home in a clearing not far from the enchanted tree. Yaga Onekin's house placed Yaga Tatyana's laboratory there and we helped Kolya repair and extend it into a small cabin.

It's strange, living in a house that is not alive. I'm not sure I'll ever get used to it. And I miss the parties for the dead too. But I love that my new bedroom has a window that looks out to the enchanted tree. The whisper of its leaves at night hold echoes of the breath of my house and every soul that we guided together.

My bedroom also has a door that leads straight outside to a wildflower garden. Kolya helped me build a picnic bench for this space and a shelter for the baby houses, if they choose to use it. I placed my horsehair blanket inside the shelter, along with a bed of sweet-smelling dried grasses.

I love spending time with Kolya. He was thrilled to discover that he's my great-uncle. He says that he should have guessed, because I have the fire of my grandmother and mother – his sister-in-law and niece – along with the kindness of my father.

When Kolya first took me to the village, he neatly combed his hair and beard with pine oil, put on his smartest tunic and matching waist sash, and introduced me to everyone as his great-niece with the proudest sparkle in his eyes that I've ever seen.

I go to the village most days now, as I've started school there, and Yaga Tatyana has arranged for me to learn different things with different people too. So Uncle Kolya is teaching me carpentry and weaving, a librarian in

the village is guiding my reading, and a fisherwoman with a fondness for music is teaching me both boating and the *balalaika* – I decided to try to learn to play it again after I realized Baba's *balalaika* was safe in Yaga Tatyana's laboratory, because Benjamin carried it there after The Gate exploded.

I'm learning about healing plants with my new neighbours, Yanka and Mamochka too. We have become good friends with Yanka and Mamochka, and when I can't watch the buds on the enchanted tree, they have been taking turns to keep an eye on them. Yanka has a weasel companion called Mousetrap who has become very protective of the growing houses. He often stands guard over them, growling a high-pitched, squeaky growl at any birds who dare to hop too close.

Jack keeps an eye on the buds too, from above. He has become close with a local jackdaw who I've been calling Nora, and they are building a nest together in a hollow of the enchanted tree. Or trying to, at least. Jack doesn't seem to be very good at it, because over half the twigs and branches he shoves into the hollow fall out again. Many of them are scattered around me now.

I'm sitting beneath the tree, beside the buds. It's early evening but the late spring air is still warm. Almost a whole season has passed since the house ran away and my life changed for ever. Sometimes it feels like that time has flown by, but other times it feels like an eternity. Yaga Tatyana says time stops following the rules when you miss someone.

Golden beams of sunlight filter through the canopy, making dappled patterns on the forest floor. Nearby, tall grasses and herbs sway in Mamochka's garden. Bees buzz as they gather pollen and nectar from the many flowers and fly up to their nest in the branches of the enchanted tree.

Yaga Tatyana is in our cabin, preparing a meal with Kolya. They've planned a picnic for us tonight, in the wildflower garden. Kolya said we could start carving pictures into the picnic bench we made, although I haven't decided what I'd like to carve yet.

I've been writing a letter to Benjamin, telling him what I've been doing and inviting him to come and visit over the school holidays. Yaga Tatyana has said she will help us learn more about Gates and Realms, and even introduce us to someone who can teach Benjamin more about Gate Carving.

There is an upcoming summer festival too, which everyone in the village is getting excited about. There will be a show, canoe-racing and other

games on the river. It sounds fun, but I'm most excited about seeing Benjamin, his father and Benji the sheep – Yaga Onekin offered to carry all three of them here in his house – and I can't wait to show them how much the baby houses have grown.

I turn back to the buds, wondering once more what will happen when the houses emerge.

A quiet tapping sounds from the nearest bud and I lean close, holding my breath. A tiny clawed foot kicks at the bud casing. Goosebumps rise on my skin. Everything sparkles gold – the bud, the tree, even the air around us. It's probably a sunbeam shifting as the sun sinks, but still, it feels magical.

The bud glows in the light and the chicken foot breaks through. A smile bursts over my face as the baby house wriggles its way out of the bud, grips the branch and stands up. The house stretches its legs – until it is as tall as my hand – and turns its body from side to side, exploring its new freedom. Then it looks up into the canopy, blinking its shutters.

The house gazes up for what seems like a long time. I think perhaps it's watching sunlight play in the leaves and listening to the wind whisper through them. My lungs burn. I realize I'm still holding my breath and inhale deeply. The sound is loud in the quiet of the forest.

The tiny house turns and stares at me curiously. This is the house with the shuttered windows and eaves that move like my house's used to, and its expression is so familiar that tears well in my eyes.

"Hello," I say softly. "I'm Marinka."

The house shuffles along the branch, a little closer to me, and warmth swells in my chest.

Jack swoops down and lands on my shoulder. I start, thinking he will scare away the tiny house, but the house only tilts its roof back to look at Jack with the same curious expression. Jack cackles a greeting and it must sound loud to the house, because now it retreats a few steps.

I look over to my and Yaga Tatyana's new home, hoping to share this moment with her and Kolya. I smile as I realize they are both standing a few paces away. They must have seen what was happening and crept over without me noticing.

Another bud splits open and the house with the crooked chimney wriggles free. Before I have a chance to catch it, it flops to the ground and lands with a small bump between two roots. "Oh no! Are you all right?" I ask, looking down at the upturned house. It seems dazed, but unharmed. I

offer it my outstretched hand and it grips the edge of my palm with a tiny foot and pulls itself upright.

The house stands on my palm, stretching its legs and moving its body. It looks up at me with two round front windows, one slightly bigger than the other, and smiles with a wide arched door.

“Hello, I’m Marinka.” I smile back, wondering if I should give the houses names. My house was called House, like all the other Yaga houses I know – which was fine because Yaga houses spend nearly all their time on their own. But now, with three houses in one place, it feels right that they should have different names.

I glance back to the first house and find it helping the third house to wriggle free of its bud – its wrap-around porch has become caught on the bud casing. The house on my hand hops over to help and soon all three houses are clambering down to the forest floor.

In my mind, I’ve started thinking of the houses as Windows, Chimney and Porch, because of the features they have that remind me of my house, although I decide to ask Yaga Tatyana later if we should choose something else or let the houses choose their own names. It feels like a big decision.

On the forest floor, the houses hop and jump about excitedly. They clamber over roots and twigs and weave their way through grasses and wildflowers. Their confidence grows and soon Windows is running around the tree, with the others chasing it.

Yaga Tatyana laughs with delight when Windows runs over to the nearest pine, but my heart beats up into my throat as I worry it will keep on running and not come back. But Windows does return and I watch in wonder as all three houses play a game that looks like a combination of hide-and-seek and tag amongst the tall grasses.

During one of the chases, all the houses run over my leg, one after the other, making me giggle. Jack watches them with his head tilted to one side and his companion, Nora, flies down to watch from a nearby branch too.

The sun dips lower and shadows gather on the forest floor. “Shall we eat?” Yaga Tatyana asks. “The picnic is all ready.”

I look over to the wildflower garden, where baskets of food are laid out on the bench. It isn’t far away, but I still worry about leaving the houses.

“The houses will see where you are.” Yaga Tatyana nods reassuringly. “And you’ll be able to see them too.”

“All right.” I rise to my feet. I am hungry and I think it would be good for the houses to see where I live before dark.

Yaga Tatyana and Kolya link arms with me as we wander over to the picnic bench. I keep glancing back to the houses, hoping they might follow. But they keep playing their game around the enchanted tree, although I notice Windows does keep glancing up to watch where we are heading.

The picnic is delicious: mushroom *piroshki*, cheese *vatrushki*, black bread and vegetable salad, and *kozinaki* and sweet *pastilas* for dessert. We eat and watch the houses as the sun sets and I sketch a picture of them playing on the letter I was writing to Benjamin.

I draw the enchanted tree behind the baby houses and think how endings, no matter how difficult, always have beginnings nestled inside them. And although I don’t know where this one will lead, at least I know that I can trust my heart to guide me.

Jack and Nora fly over to procure some scraps of food and when their bellies are full, they cuddle up together on the carved eaves of our new home.

Chimney wanders over, shivering in the cooling air. I move to sit beside the shelter and show the little house the horsehair blanket and fragrant grasses inside. But Chimney hops onto my lap instead and snuggles down in the corner of my shawl.

The other two houses soon follow and warmth floods through me as all three houses nestle themselves together on my lap. I slide my shawl down from my shoulders and drape it over the houses, so all their tiny legs are protected from the cool air. Windows blinks up at me and its eaves curve into a smile as it drifts off to sleep.

Yaga Tatyana rises to her feet and pulls my horsehair blanket out of the shelter and over my shoulders. Then she wanders indoors and returns with three mugs of *sbiten* – a hot honey drink with spices that Mamochka gave us the recipe for – along with some sweet, crunchy *sushki* to dip into it.

“Have you decided what you’d like to carve on this bench yet, Marinka?” Kolya asks.

I nod, thinking of the picture I drew on my letter to Benjamin. “I’d like to carve the enchanted tree, with the buds growing. Then the young houses playing. And I could record more of the moments the houses spend with us before they leave.”

“Leave?” Kolya’s eyebrows draw together and I nod again.

“They will leave one day,” I say. “Houses with chicken legs have an urge to run, to keep moving on, to new places and new experiences.”

Yaga Tatyana smiles at me. “It’s good to keep moving, learning and growing.”

“How long do you think they might stay?” Kolya asks, looking down at the sleeping houses. Porch’s balustrade has crumpled against Windows’s shutters. I gently straighten out the warm, soft wood. Then I untie Baba’s headscarf – that I have been wearing around my neck – and fold it beneath the houses as a pillow.

“I don’t know,” I say to Kolya. “But I hope that we can learn and grow together for a while – explore the forest, make some friends, share some stories, have plenty of fun and adventures too. I will treasure every moment I have with them. And eventually, when the time comes, I’ll say goodbye.” I glance over to the enchanted tree and think of how painful goodbyes can be.

Tears well in my eyes and I look up to the night sky, twinkling through the gaps in the canopy. I think of the house and Baba and all the souls I’ve helped guide to the stars and my heart both aches with loss and swells with love. So many of the dead carry love to the stars.

I look back down to Yaga Tatyana and Uncle Kolya, Jack and Nora, and the three houses softly snoring on my lap. My heart swells again, sending warmth rippling through me. I feel love in and around each of us. The living can carry so much love too.

And right now, I am happy to be here, in the present, surrounded by love and life, with an unknown future ahead that glistens with possibilities.

The baby houses’ feet twitch as they run through their dreams. I think of them growing and changing and moving on, carrying love through their lives and beyond. I think of all the love in every beat of the great cycle and though there are still tears in my eyes, I smile.

MARINKA'S GLOSSARY

Balalaika: a musical instrument with a triangular body and three strings
Borsch: beetroot soup; there are many different varieties to suit different tastes
Kasha: porridge, often made from buckwheat
Kozinaki: a sweet bar made from nuts, seeds and honey
Kvass: a sour, tangy drink made by fermenting bread or grains
Mamochka: a term of endearment for a mother
Pastilas: bars of baked jellied fruit
Pchelka: little bee, a term of endearment
Piroshki: baked or fried puff pastries with a sweet or savoury filling
Pryanik: a small sweet bread flavoured with spices
Sbiten: a hot honey drink made with spices
Sukhary: a type of cookie, perfect for dunking
Sushki: small, sweet, crunchy bread rings
Trost (spirit *trost*): the fiery drink for the dead; named trost after a walking stick, because it helps them on their journey
Vatrushki: round pastries usually filled with cheese

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Sophie Anderson was born in Swansea, and now lives in the Lake District with her family. Her writing is most often inspired by folk and fairy stories, especially the Slavic tales her Prussian grandmother told her when she was young.

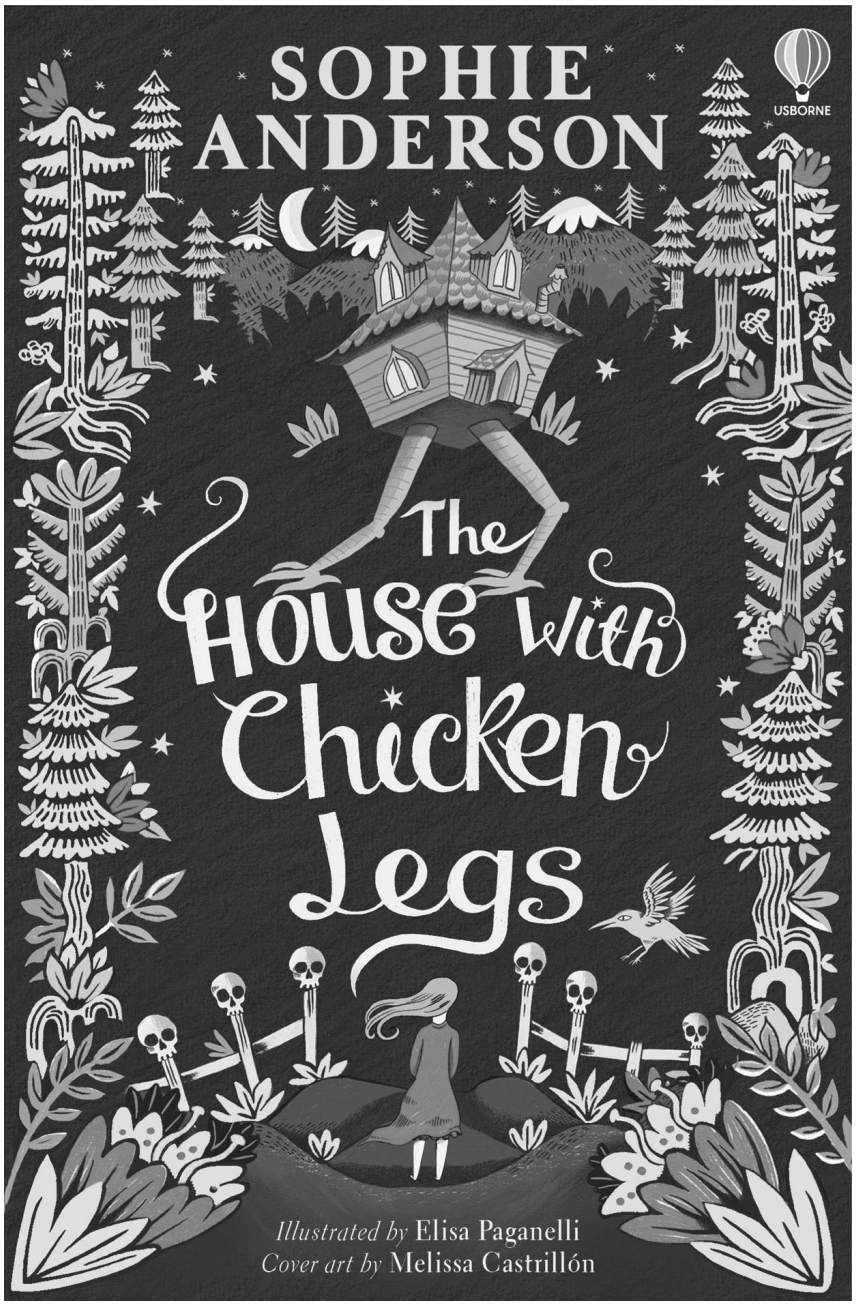
Across her bestselling novels, Sophie has won the Independent Bookshop Book of the Year Award and the Wales Book of the Year Award, and been shortlisted for the CILIP Carnegie Medal twice, the Waterstones Children's Book Prize, the Blue Peter Book Award, the British Book Awards' Children's Fiction Book of the Year, the Andersen Prize and the Branford Boase Award.

Sophie's books have been translated intoover twenty-five languages, and *The House with Chicken Legs* has been adapted for stage by Les Enfants Terribles.

Melissa Castrillón is an illustrator and designer with a mix of English and Colombian roots. She has illustrated over twenty-five book covers and more than ten picture books. She has also written and illustrated three picture books of her own, which have been translated into more than twenty languages. In 2019, she was awarded the Gold medal by the Society of Illustrators in New York.

Elisa Paganelli was born in Modena, Italy, but is currently based in the UK with her beloved dog, where she works as a freelance illustrator and creative designer. Books she has illustrated have been *New York Times* bestsellers, won the Waterstones Children's Book Prize, been shortlisted for The Week Junior Book Award, and so much more.

Find Out Where it All Began…



Marinka dreams of a normal life, where her house stays in one place long enough for her to make friends. But her house has chicken legs and moves on without warning.

For Marinka's grandmother is Baba Yaga, who guides spirits between this world and the next. Marinka longs to change her destiny and sets out to break free from her grandmother's footsteps, but her house has other ideas…

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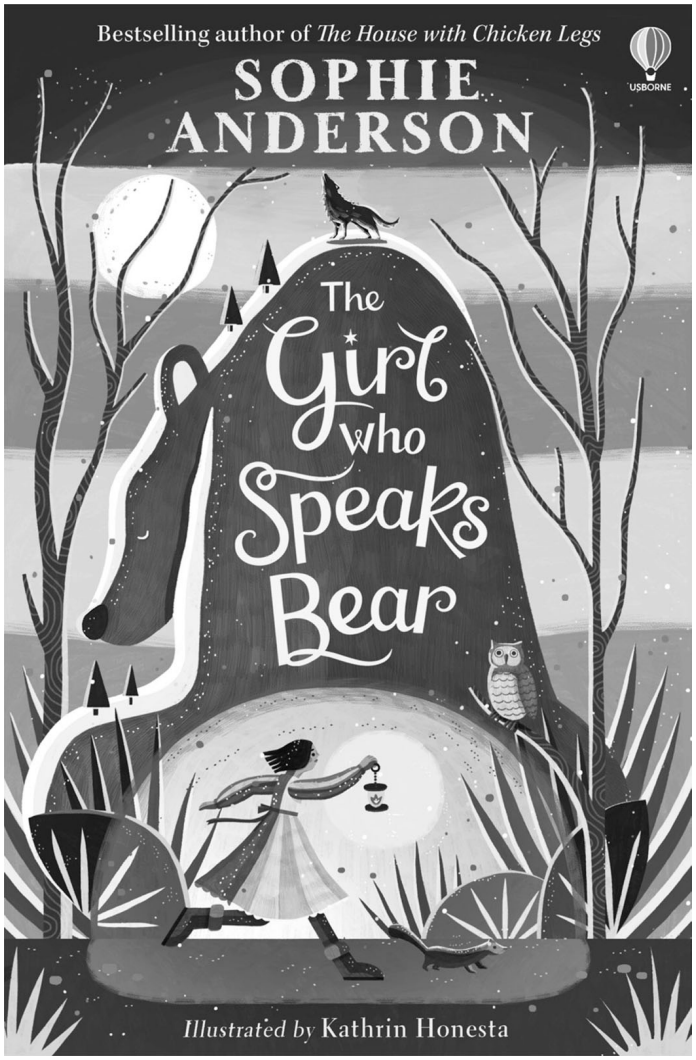
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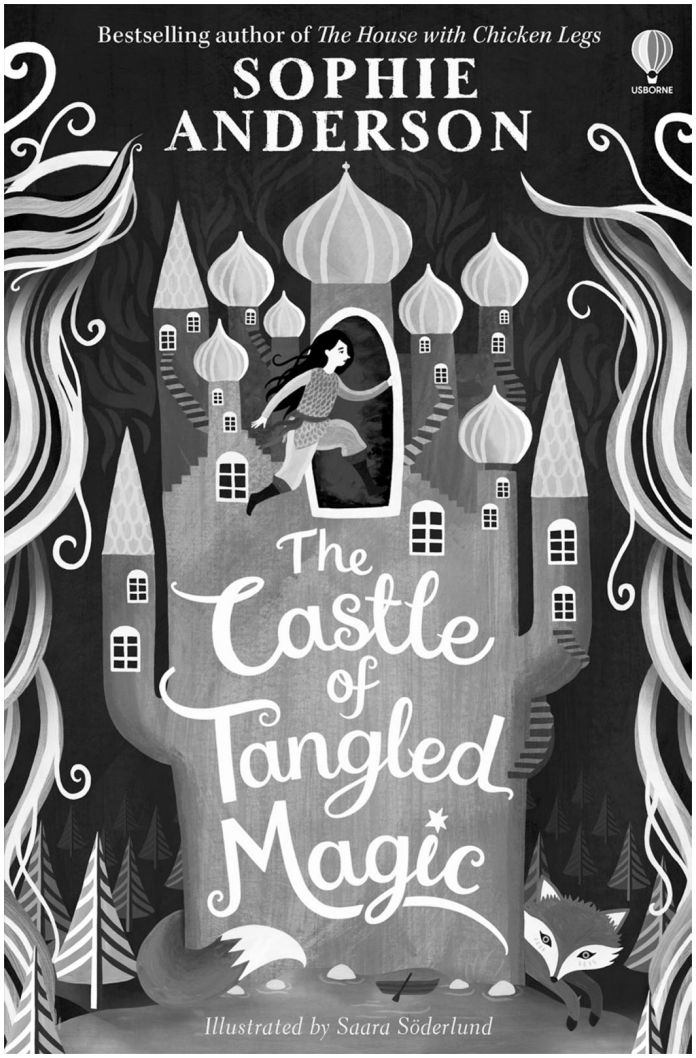
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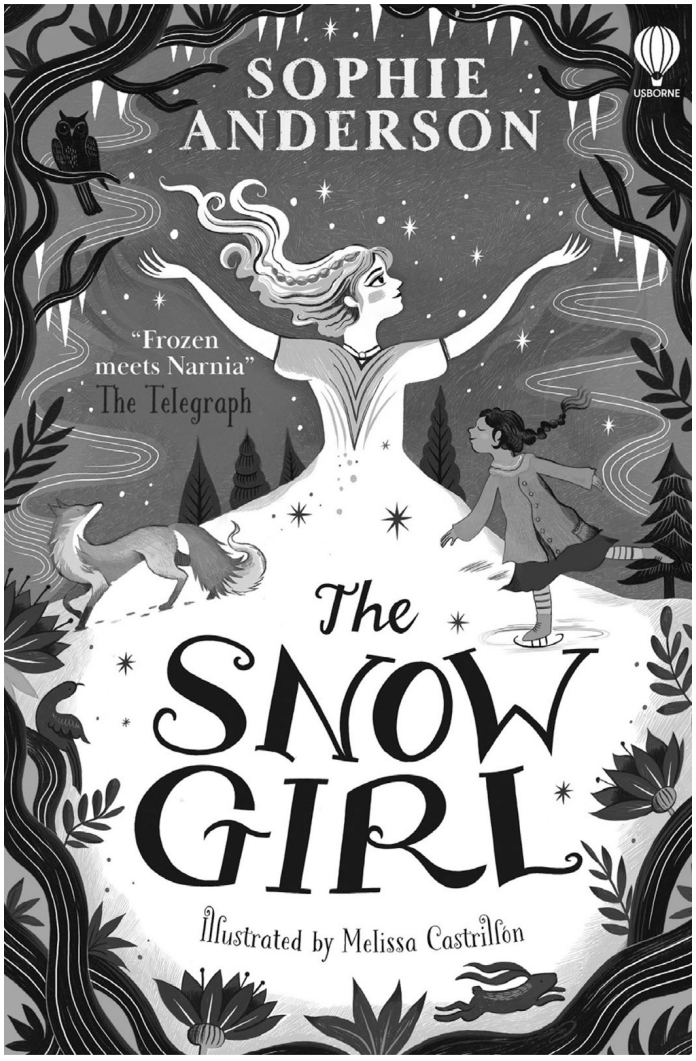
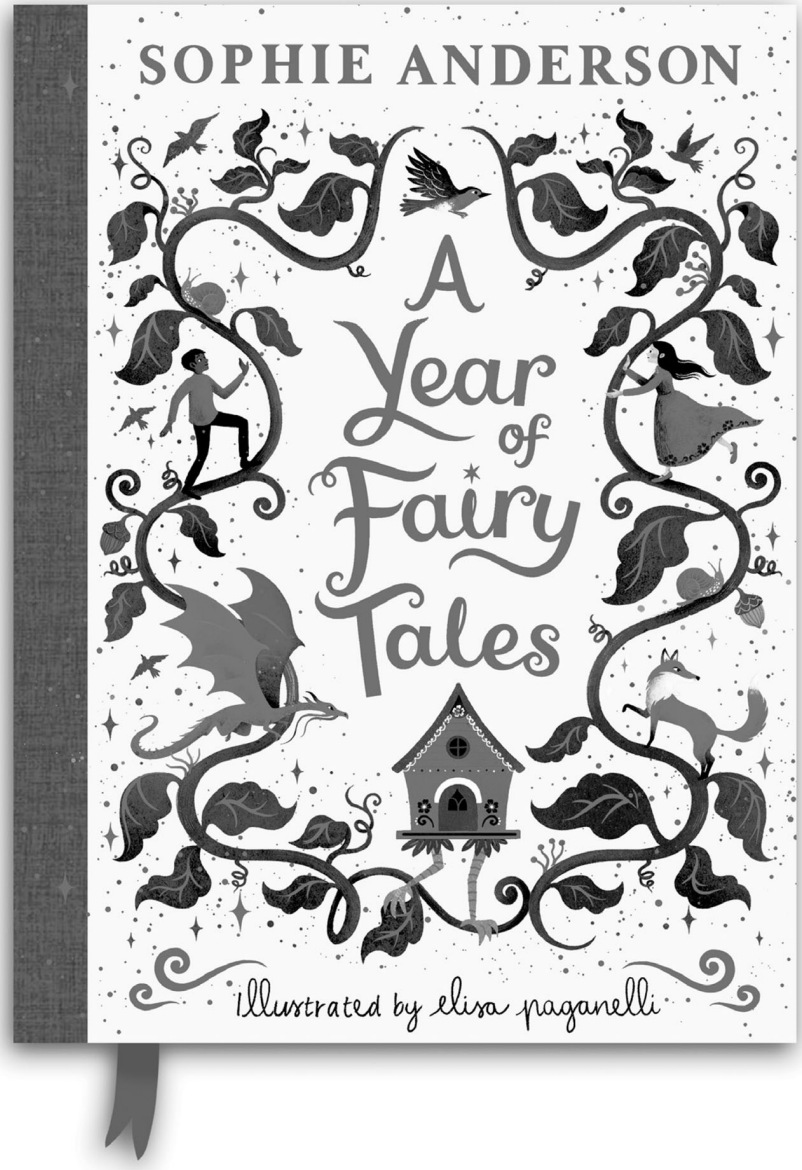
The Island of Morovia is shaped like a broken heart. The humans live on one side of the island, and the alkonosts – the bird-people – live on the other. But it wasn't always this way…



When Tasha builds a snow girl, all she wants is for her to come to life. Then Tasha meets Alyana, whose face glitters with starlight. But how can you welcome Spring, when your best friend is made of Winter?

EACH SEASON HAS A STORY TO TELL…



Journey through the seasons and celebrations of a child's year in this epic collection of fairy tales from the bestselling, award-winning author of *The House with Chicken Legs*, Sophie Anderson.

Brimming with magic and extraordinary adventure, the stories are all inspired by fairy tales that have been passed down for generations. Some are twists on classics, such as *Jack and the Beanstalk* and *Rapunzel*, while others are original stories inspired by folklore, such as *The Bear and the Dragon* and *The Sleeping Forest*.

Packed with colourful illustrations by Elisa Paganelli, this stunning gift book brings Sophie's gorgeous, lyrical storytelling to life.

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